

NEBULOUS FIGURES: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF AN AMERICAN RIOTOCRACY, 1848-1929

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ABSTRACT

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In the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx outlines a collective grouping of “nebulous figures” who exist outside the wage relation and remain merely specters upon the terrain of bourgeois political economy, lives only recognized during the working hours of the production process. This project explores how cultural representations of these nebulous figures during the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in America evince a social desire to abolish the form of wage labor itself, a political modality articulated by Herman Melville in his 1854 novella *The Encantadas* as a “*Riotocracy*.” Rather than looking to depictions of work, this project focuses upon elucidating how portrayals of those on the outsides and undersides of wage labor reveal a robust critical capacity for conceptualizing the rejection of work within capitalism as a form of communistic *poiesis*, a fundamentally creative act of collective worldmaking. Chapter I demonstrates how idleness disrupts the spatio-temporal rhythm of capitalism’s workday and argues that it signals a revolutionary desire for free time. Chapter II turns to the tramp as a nebulous figure who both constructs a commons upon the private property of capital’s commodity flows and crafts a collectivist aesthetic grounded in riotocratic aims. Chapter III examines American realist and naturalist novels at the *fin de siècle*, positing that the literary depictions of nebulous figures therein continually evade and exceed these genres’ attempts at representational totality. Chapter IV

analyzes a variety of formal representational strategies which each attempt to tie life on the outskirts of the wage to a revelation of material reality. The conclusion looks to the political afterlife of the riotocracy from the 1930s to the present. In tracing a political economic theorizing from below, this study identifies these nebulous figures and their riotocratic political desire as thoroughly embedded within nineteenth- and twentieth-century American cultural production and concludes that the anti-work utopianism of those on the margins of wage labor manifests in the assembly of improvisatory commons rooted in a restaging of value.

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Introduction

Freedom means not having to work.
—Max Horkheimer, *Towards a New Manifesto*

This project begins in two places simultaneously, emerging out of their moment of combination with both an object for investigation and a theoretical apparatus for undertaking it. From an admixture of Marx and Melville, I intend to demonstrate how a political imagining and striving against the form of wage labor as such came to be intertwined with figurations of those outside of the wage relation, leaving textual traces throughout American cultural productions during the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In examining this political modality which desired not a reform of capitalist wage labor but rather its abolition, this project does not center its analysis upon the figure of the worker or of work but rather on the representations of those figures on the outsides and undersides of production which theorize a critique of the form of work itself.

In the Second Manuscript of Marx's 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, "The Relationship of Private Property," the young Marx of fragments and partialities who in fits and starts evinces the mature Marx writes that "the *worker* has the misfortune to be a *living* capital, and hence a capital *with needs*, which forfeits its interest and hence its existence every moment it is not working." This particular "misfortune," that as a worker which is a living, breathing, sweating "capital with needs" one can only strive to meet the fulfilment of these needs on the terrain of work and every second spent outside this plane of activity marks a forfeiture of one's "interest" and "existence" as a worker, marks the confinement of proletarian spacetime to the realm of production. From the perspective of political economy, the worker exists singularly and solely in the period of labor, perpetually drawn to it as the

necessary replenishment and reproduction of existence, possessing needs impossible to meet without drawing another breath of the oxygenated labor attached to the wage. This (re)valuation of the whole of life as only measurable and meaningful as working life is the misfortune of the enforced misery of immiseration at the core of the capitalist production of value: “As capital, the *value* of the worker rises or falls in accordance with supply and demand, and even in a *physical* sense his *existence*, his *life*, was and is treated as a supply of a *commodity*, like any other commodity.”¹ This reduction of the worker to “a *commodity*, like any other commodity” presents us with the fungibility of life, an exchangeability which flattens out all that one is besides the work one does. But since the worker remains “a capital *with needs*” in addition to being “a *commodity*, like any other commodity” the specific contours of “misfortune” begin to appear with the interruption of the worker’s relation to work, when the wage which brings the possibility of life has been cut off and the worker left without the labor which encompasses their existence:

So as soon as it occurs to capital—whether from necessity or choice—not to exist any longer for the worker, he no longer exists for himself; he has *no* work, and hence *no* wages, and since he exists not *as a man* but *as a worker*, he might just as well have himself buried, starve to death, etc. The worker exists as a worker only when he exists *for himself* as capital, and he exists as capital only when *capital* exists *for him*. The existence of capital is *his* existence, his *life*, for it determines the content of his life in a manner indifferent to him.²

In that moment where the tenuous relationship between the worker existing for capital and capital existing for the worker has been nullified and the tether has been cut between the worker and the work, it also disconnects the worker from their very existence since this life

¹ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1992), 335.

² *Ibid.*

has been determined by capital. The state of having “no work” and “no wages” is the state of the worker’s non-existence to capital, yet the needs of the now out of work worker have of course not vanished, they have just moved outside of capital’s terrain, becoming superfluous, as if buried and dead to the process of value production.

If the worker requires the workday and the wages it affords in order to exist as, within, and for capital, then the very existence of the worker in the eyes of the political economist would thus appear as solely delimited to the labor process itself. Bourgeois political economy has *no* place for one with “no work” and “no wages”:

Political economy therefore does not recognize the unoccupied worker, the working man in so far as he is outside this work relationship. The swindler, the cheat, the beggar, the unemployed, the starving, the destitute and the criminal working man are *figures* which exist not *for it*, but only for other eyes—for the eyes of doctors, judges, grave-diggers, beadles, etc. Nebulous figures which do not belong within the province of political economy. Therefore as far as political economy is concerned, the requirements of the worker can be narrowed down to one: the *need to support him while he is working* and prevent the *race of workers* from dying out.³

Only the wage laborer laboring exists as a character within the narratives of bourgeois political economy for only here in the relationship between capital and worker can they be accounted for. The wage laborer at work exists as a privileged figure for the bourgeois political economist yet one who lacks the fullness of humanity as they only exist in this story so long as they keep up their toil. “The unoccupied worker,” the one not actively producing and off the clock of the working day or working night, is not “recognized,” unaccounted for and only of interest when returned to the wage-earning occupation. The “unoccupied worker” exists to political economy as a perpetual loss, only ever forfeiting the time which could be spent in laboring ever more; however, “the unoccupied worker” marks a break in

³ Ibid.

the spacetime of this political economy, existing in a realm outside of its vision, beyond the scope of its concern. Marx further enumerates a contingent who exists alongside “the unoccupied worker,” those in the no-place of political economy. “The swindler, the cheat, the beggar, the unemployed, the starving, the destitute and the criminal working man” do not exist for the bourgeois political economist, do not find themselves listed among the cast of characters in its playbill of value production.

These “nebulous figures which do not belong within the province of political economy” must then belong to another province altogether. In this project, I have termed this province the nebula, a conceptual marker for a relation which seeks to bring together “the unoccupied worker” alongside “the swindler, the cheat, the beggar, the unemployed, the starving, the destitute and the criminal working man” as a collective unity, a way of demarcating the mode of life outside of the labor process, the spacetime of “no work” and “no wages.” These nebulous figures (or, *Gespenster*) and the nebula they populate make up the subjects of this dissertation.

This formation marks out, however, only one portion of how Marx would theorize the outsides and undersides of the wage relation. In 1852’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx writes of the lumpenproletariat, a ragged and tattered proletariat consisting of “the scum, the leavings, the refuse of all classes.” That earlier naming of nebulous figures from the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* has now grown into a significantly longer list:

Alongside decayed roués of doubtful origin and uncertain means of subsistence, alongside ruined and adventurous scions of the bourgeoisie, there were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged criminals, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, confidence tricksters, *lazzarone*, pickpockets, sleight-of-hand experts, gamblers, *masquereaux*,

brothel-keepers, porters, pen-pushers, organ-grinders, rag-and-bone merchants, knife-grinders, tinkers and beggars: in short, the whole indeterminate fragmented mass, tossed backwards and forwards, which the French call *la bohème*.⁴

Marx refers to this “indeterminate fragmented mass” as a counterrevolutionary contingent, a grouping made up of a class acting decidedly against the proletariat itself, seemingly separating the wageless from the wage earner as distinct classes with countervailing political interests. By characterizing this so-called lumpenproletariat as a class of its own who had acted on behalf of a revanchist Bonapartism, Marx has seemed to draw a line between the waged and the unwaged, castigating the latter as a “scum” and “refuse” which had betrayed the revolutionary working class. Yet a reading which draws from this a permanent alignment between the unwaged and reaction mistakes the historically contingent and particularized nature of this writing, one which does not suggest itself as a theorization of the lumpenproletariat as such and forevermore. Even so, Marx’s rhetoric herein posits a connection between those cast off from the realm of the wage and a humanity that is little else but flotsam and jetsam, a failure on his part which ends up making the theoretician’s gaze one more set of eyes to be counted among “doctors, judges, grave-diggers, beadles, etc.” which have failed to comprehend these nebulous figures as anything beyond problems to be solved.

In the mature Marx, however, we see a more capacious theorization of those lives lived outside and beyond the wage. In the notebooks composed during 1857-8 which would come to make up the *Grundrisse*, he lays out a thesis for the ways in which all wage labor carries with it the unwaged: “It is already contained in the concept of the *free labourer*, that he

⁴ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *The Political Writings* (London: Verso, 2019), 531.

is a *pauper*. virtual pauper.” If the figure of the worker within capitalism is always also a “virtual pauper,” because the worker’s necessities can only be met “in so far as he exchanges his labour capacity for that part of capital which forms the labour fund,” then “the virtual pauper” perpetually haunts the figure of the worker, unemployment an omnipresent possibility, and that spacetime of the nebula which marks all the time off the clock for the unoccupied worker bleeds over into the whole of life during the periods of formal unemployment. As capitalism necessitates the worker “produces ever more surplus labour, it follows that ever more *necessary labour* is set free” and “the chances of his pauperism increase.” The virtual pauperdom embedded within the concept of free labor continually tends towards the realization of actual pauperdom for a portion of the working class due to the conditions capitalist production: “Only in the mode of production based on capital does pauperism appear as the result of labour itself, of the development of the productive force of labour.”⁵ Casting the worker as virtual pauper illuminates the proletariat as that social group whose tenuous access to the wage is all that stands between themselves and a more totalizing dispossession, a virtual bulwark which masks the degree of immiseration already present in the set of conditions by which necessity can only be met by selling one’s labor. In already having no choice but turning to the wage to meet one’s needs, the freedom to work or to starve which is no freedom at all appears in the first volume of *Capital* as “*vogelfrei*,” the condition of being within that “free and rightless proletariat” who had been “suddenly dragged from their accustomed mode of life” during the breakup of feudalism. This expropriation directly led to the creation of masses of “beggars, robbers and vagabonds”

⁵ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 604.

which required the state to adopt that “bloody legislation” which could forcefully compel those who were made free as birds to go to work and become virtual paupers.⁶ And in that chapter where he lays out “*the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation*” which states that “the more extensive, finally the pauperized sections of the working class and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism,” Marx provides a rigorous accounting for the relationship between the waged and unwaged.⁷ We find here the “relative surplus population,” that category in which every worker belongs when “partially employed or wholly unemployed” and encompasses “three forms which it always possesses: the floating, the latent, and the stagnant.”⁸ The floating relative surplus population exists around large-scale industry in which the forces of capital quickly burn through employees and needs the proletariat to “take a form which swells their numbers, despite the rapid wastage of their individual elements.”⁹ The latent form can be found in the realm of capitalist agriculture in which the industrial work of the city continually relies upon a portion of the agricultural population to be “constantly on the point of passing over into an urban or manufacturing proletariat, and on the lookout for opportunities to complete this transformation,” making the agricultural worker continually live “with one foot already in the swamp of pauperism.” The stagnant form encompasses all those suffering within “a maximum of working time and a minimum of wages,” all those workers “who have become redundant” and cannot gain a

⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 896.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 798.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 794.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 795.

steady foothold, whose mode of work has passed into obsolescence.¹⁰ Marx then arrives at “the lowest sediment of the relative surplus population” which is that of the pauper (not to be confused with what he calls “the actual lumpenproletariat” made up of “vagabonds, criminals, [and] prostitutes”) which consists of those who can work but simply cannot obtain it, orphans and children, and “the demoralized, the ragged, and those unable to work.” The pauper, he argues, “forms a condition of capitalist production, and of the capitalist production of wealth” and is a figure fundamentally inherent to the capitalist mode of production.¹¹ The mature Marx provides us with a framework for thinking the ways in which the wage laborer is permanently connected to the unwaged through their mutual dispossession and immiseration within a capitalist world-system, inevitably tied together and inseparable as every work is predicated upon the continual possibility of its absence and the unwaged an actively constructed social category necessary to the capitalist production of value.

In deploying the concept of nebulous figures initially utilized by the young Marx of the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, I contend that we can best capture the heterogeneous and variegated theoretical apparatuses utilized by Marx across his oeuvre to conceptualize the condition of “no work” and “no wages” known not only by the worker during the hours of non-laboring time but also by “the swindler, the cheat, the beggar, the unemployed, the starving, the destitute and the criminal working man,” the so-called “lumpenproletariat,” “the virtual pauper,” the “*vogelfrei*” dispossessed, and “the relative surplus population.” All of these various figurations constitute an occupation of that nebula

¹⁰ Ibid., 796.

¹¹ Ibid., 797.

which does not exist within “the province of political economy.” These nebulous figures, however, do occupy another province quite prominently—that of the cultural realm—and we must turn there to determine how textual representations of and from this grouping are bound up with a process of resistance to the capitalist forms of work itself.¹²

In his “Sketch Seventh: Charles’s Isle and the Dog-King” from the 1854 novella *The Encantadas*, Herman Melville crafts a brief parable of sovereignty’s collapse. A “Creole adventurer from Cuba” who had fought on behalf of Peru has been granted total sovereignty of Charles’s Isle in the Enchanted Isles.¹³ “Some eighty souls, men and women”¹⁴ embark with him to Charles’s Isle to be the subjects of his new kingdom; however, “the peculiarly untoward character of many of the pilgrims” leads the king “to proclaim martial law” in order to quell the threat to his power.¹⁵ Putting down this initial rebellion, the king of Charles’s Isle begins to bolster the population by encouraging sailors “to desert their ships, and enlist beneath his banner.” This international grouping of “renegado strangers” and “lawless mariners” eventually mutiny and overthrow the sovereign whereupon they “stove the spirit casks and proclaimed a Republic.”¹⁶ As the sovereign in exile back in Peru awaits

¹² As Stuart Hall writes in *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 206: “Rather than reserving the notion of class struggle only for the moment of the barricades, we need to see resistance as the continual practices of working on the cultural domain and opening up cultural possibilities.”

¹³ Melville, “The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles,” in *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 100.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.; C. L. R. James claims that in *The Encantadas*, Melville arrives at “the conclusion that modern civilization is doomed.” Yet it remains perhaps a vestige of a kind of anti-utopianism which prevents James from observing that the “renegado strangers” and “lawless mariners” which bring about this destruction of the political in *The Encantadas* are the very “mariners, renegades and castaways” in which he finds the international and interracial proletariat onboard the *Pequod* except they have in this allegory merely escaped and abandoned the scene of labor. C. L. R. James, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2001), 108.

news of the island's descent into chaos and eventual collapse, he is dismayed to discover that this "motley crew"¹⁷ of rebels has arranged itself into a form of collective political life far more robust than the hierarchical structure it had overthrown:

Doubtless he deemed the Republic but a miserable experiment which would soon explode. But no, the insurgents had confederated themselves into a democracy neither Grecian, Roman, nor American. Nay, it was no democracy at all, but a permanent *Riotocracy*, which gloried in having no law but lawlessness. Great inducements being offered to deserters, their ranks were swelled by accessions of scamps from every ship which touched their shores. Charles's Island was proclaimed the asylum of the oppressed of all navies. Each runaway tar was hailed as a martyr in the cause of freedom, and became immediately installed a ragged citizen of this universal nation. In vain the captains of absconding seaman strove to regain them. Their new compatriots were ready to give any number of ornamental eyes in their behalf. They had few cannon, but their fists were not to be trifled with. So at last it came to pass that no vessels acquainted with the character of that country durst touch there, however sorely in want of refreshment. It became Anathema—a sea Alsatia—the unassailed lurking place of all sorts of desperadoes, who in the name of liberty did just what they pleased.¹⁸

This revolutionary formation of "renegado strangers" and "lawless mariners" who have escaped the immiserations of work (of being a worker) and the violence of states (of being a subject) by abolishing its forms, have crafted an anarchistic and communistic mode of shared life capable of autonomously governing itself by refusing to govern at all.¹⁹ Melville

¹⁷ This usage is intended to invoke the multiple layers of meaning invoked by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker in *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), 27-8 which ties together the "motley crew" with both a multiracial and a ragged/lumpen-proletariat.

¹⁸ Herman Melville, "The Encantadas," 104.

¹⁹ This mode of the political which continually negates its prior forms in order to enshrine the autonomous practices of everyday life resounds harmoniously with Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's writing on the negation of bourgeois political forms in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, 2013), 20.: "We're just anti-politically romantic about actually existing social life. We aren't responsible for politics. We are the general antagonism to politics looming outside every attempt to politicise, ever imposition of self-governance, every sovereign decision and its degraded miniature, every emergent state and home sweet home. We are disruption and consent to disruption. We preserve upheaval. Sent to fulfill by abolishing, to renew by unsettling, to open the enclosure whose immeasurable venality is inversely proportionate to its actual area, we got politics surrounded. We cannot represent ourselves. We can't be represented."

emphasizes this negation, initially calling the confederation “a democracy neither Grecian, Roman, nor American” before immediately declaring that “it was no democracy at all”; instead, this “permanent *Riotocracy* which gloried in having no law but lawlessness” marks a radicalism which has its roots in nullifying bourgeois democracy.²⁰ This new “Republic” on Charles’s Isle continues to grow with the perpetual joining of “deserters” and “scamps” from any ship which comes to shore, a community born out of a fugitivity from the labor process. An escape from harsh, martial working conditions, this “asylum of the oppressed of all navies” formed out of revolt establishes a commune in which “each runaway tar” is “immediately installed a ragged citizen of this universal nation.” Melville not only imagines here a mode of political life in which raggedness, that *lumpen* characteristic, constellates lives held in common *sans* sovereigns and wages but also proposes that this raggedness is a belonging capable of constructing a “universal nation” which in its radical inclusivity undoes the pernicious separations and distinctions of nationalism itself. Bound together in their shared material condition of raggedness and their mutual desire to abandon work, the “*Riotocracy*” operates as a way of reproducing a non-hierarchical social world which in having “no law but lawlessness” refuses the policing function of the state; however, Melville notes that though this grouping lacks the weaponry of a state, these “desperadoes, who in the name of liberty did just what they pleased” possess the capacity to fiercely defend themselves

²⁰ Rogin mentions in his masterful monograph on Melville a letter Herman’s father Allan Melvill had sent a letter to Herman’s maternal grandfather Peter Gansevoort who was running for New York state assembly warning him to beware of the “mobocratical spirit” which threatened “old established monied institutions.” Melville here reimagines the “mobocratical spirit” as the “*Riotocracy*” which has fully rid itself of those traditions of reproducing bourgeois self-interest via the political and seemingly too to have noted his own genealogical tie to his financially ruined father by casting this “*Riotocracy*” as a more stable community than that produced by antebellum America’s class society mediated by market forces. Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 52.

with their fists, a willingness to uphold and maintain the revolution. That the riotocratic mode is “permanent” alerts us to its continual capacity for renewal, a form which does not remain unchangingly frozen but is in perpetual motion, reestablishing itself autonomously from the self-activity of those who reproduce it. No longer existing as workers, as living capital, these fugitives from the province of political economy adopt and adapt a social world held in common which appears in stark contrast to that counterrevolutionary tendency Marx observed among the lumpenproletariat. The Charles’s Isle Commune Melville presents us with becomes a haunting specter for the captains of all passing ships, a place to be carefully avoided lest in coming too close their own workers will abscond to the shores of a “universal nation” in which they will be “hailed as a martyr in the cause of freedom,” recognized as a member of a community of rags and tatters which holds itself together in a continual rejection of all those mechanisms of authority which marked their former oppressions and miseries.²¹

In conjointly reading Marx and Melville, I propose that we can see an opening for beginning to think the riotocracy as a social and political imaginary emerging from within the cultural representations of nebulous figures. This project contends that the riotocracy evinces “a structure of feeling”²² of a political yearning which is neither simply a residual extension of a pre-Marxist utopian communism nor synonymous with a socialism ushered in

²¹ “Ostensibly, the concern over vagrancy and begging was a concern that those persons engaged in such activities were more likely to engage in criminal activity—just as the economy was always already political, so class of the poor was always already a threat—but, in some senses, the greatest ‘crime’ was thought to be the idleness itself, since this deprived the state of the vagabond’s contribution to prosperity and was at the heart of all other disorderly behavior. It is almost as if all disorderly activities were subsumed under the category of ‘idleness.’” Mark Neocleous, *A Critical Theory of Police Power: The Fabrication of Social Order* (London: Verso, 2021), 78.

²² Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128-35.

by the laboring class and rooted in a desire for the redistribution of wealth and power but is rather a (barely) culturally legible manifestation of “that alternate tradition of Marxism which wishes not to glorify labor and productivity, but to abolish it altogether.”²³ Within the realm of cultural production we can see how this “alternate tradition” becomes interwoven with nebulous figures.²⁴ In looking to the myriad representations *of* and *from* those living on the margins of wage labor in America in the era between 1848 and 1929, an era ushered in by the moment of a *Gespenst* of communism’s haunting and concluding with the newly invigorated cultural era of communistic production during the Great Depression, this project proposes that refusals to work served as catalysts for the collective crafting of improvisatory commons by communities bound together in their shared rejections of labor under capitalism. I argue that those on the outsides and undersides of capitalist accumulation modeled potential worlds rooted in labor’s absence, worlds animated by radical utopian impulses which become sensible to us through cultural representations of the riotocratic aims of nebulous figures. While literary and historical studies of this era have focused upon a cultural archive centered upon wage labor, this project attends specifically to the revolutionary undercurrents discernible in the wake of its absence: the unemployed making life out of mutual aid, the tramp communalizing the private property of railroad monopolies,

²³ Fredric Jameson, *The Benjamin Files* (London: Verso, 2020), 104.

²⁴ As Dominique Kalifa writes in *Vice, Crime, and Poverty: How the Western Imagination Invented the Underworld* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 26. of the emergence of “the lower depths” as a legible and knowable category during the nineteenth century, it is only through a regime of representation that this grouping became sensible: “Did these bas-fonds and these wretches actually exist? That there were indeed poor people, thieves, prostitutes, and organized bands is unfortunately not in doubt, but whether they actually resembled the picturesque and horrified descriptions offered in the principal accounts is less certain. Essentially, the underworld arose from a *representation*, a cultural construction that was born at the intersection of literature, philanthropy, the desire for reform, and the moralizing of elites, but it also arose from a thirst for escape and for social exoticism, an avidity to exploit the potential of the ‘sensational’ emotions that these milieux have always carried, both then and now.”

unwaged domestic labor providing the material possibilities for social reproduction, and the shiftless worker stealing capital's time in idle reveries.²⁵

In order to position the subjects who make up these cultural representations, I must further elucidate the practical import of my usage of nebulous figures as a social contingent of the proletariat. It firstly encompasses those who occupy what Michael Denning refers to as living “wageless life.” As he argues: “We must insist that ‘proletarian’ is not a synonym for ‘wage labourer’ but for dispossession, expropriation and radical dependence on the market. You don’t need a job to be a proletarian: wageless life, not wage labour, is the starting point in understanding the free market.”²⁶ Thus, wageless life does not constitute a group separate and distinct from the proletariat but rather begins from a particular portion of the proletariat who is in a specific relation to the wage (one of its absence). This allows us to position the workless rather than the worker at the forefront of our analysis of a resistance to capitalist wage labor. Additionally, these nebulous figures include the so-called lumpenproletariat, that category of Marx’s which appears as a contradictory and ever shifting category within Marx’s own writings and the various strains of the Marxist tradition. The classification of the

²⁵ Though none of these texts expressly focus on the representational interconnection between the unwaged and the communistic, they each, in their respective handlings of the intertwinement of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American proletarian life, radical politics, and cultural production, mark an extraordinary contribution which in concert allow us to glimpse the foundations for just such a possibility: Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Eric Shockett, *Vanishing Moments: Class and American Literature* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006); Gavin Jones, *The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1915* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Holly Jackson, *American Radicals: How Nineteenth-Century Protest Shaped the Nation* (New York: Crown, 2019); Jeffery A. Clymer, *America’s Culture of Terrorism: Violence, Capitalism, and the Written Word* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Laura Hapke, *Labor’s Text: The Worker in American Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

²⁶ Michael Denning, “Wageless Life,” *New Left Review* 66 (Nov./Dec. 2010): 81.

lumpenproletariat carries contradictory resonances.²⁷ As Peter Stallybrass argues, Marx's heterogeneous categorization of the lumpenproletariat seems to carve off and sequester an unwanted grouping from the proletariat which itself was in the nineteenth century tied up with the figures of the beggar and the pauper and the prostitute.²⁸ By positioning the ragged proletariat as a portion of the nebula, I intend to dismantle it by subsuming it, deploying it as a marker which does not retain its meanings as a specifically definable and taxonomically registered class position but instead simply signaling that raggedness which becomes a felicitous conditions for the assembly of the riotocracy through the abandonment of labor. I too include among nebulous figures those working in piecemeal employment and informal economies as well those members of the "relative surplus population" who find themselves tending towards pauperization.²⁹ Finally, it includes the worker who is *not* working. Whether stealing time back from the labor process by Luddite sabotage³⁰ or of idling on or off the

²⁷ Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004) would famously restore a potentially revolutionary character to the lumpenproletariat in the anticolonial struggle for national independence. In Nathaniel Mills's *Ragged Revolutionaries: The Lumpenproletariat and African American Marxism in Depression-Era Literature* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2017), 12. he argues for the importance of seeing the lumpenproletariat as a potentially revolutionary class in American literature: "If classical Marxism provided an epistemology that located the socially incorporated proletariat as structurally and dialectically positioned to achieve revolution, US and African American literary and cultural sensibilities furnished ways of imagining the socially dislocated lumpenproletariat's capacity for revolutionary insight and action." Contrarily, Gerald Horne's "Rethinking the Lumpen: Gangsters and the Political Economy of Capitalism," *Nature, Society, and Thought* 10 (1-2): 285-308 finds in the lumpenproletariat a grouping that is expressly and necessarily a class known through its direct exploitation of the working-class proletariat but is not to be confused with the unemployed or the rural peasantry.

²⁸ Peter Stallybrass, "Marx and Heterogeneity: Thinking the Lumpenproletariat," *Representations* 31 (Summer, 1990): 69-95.

²⁹ For a reading of the importance of a Marxist understanding of organization which is capable of conjoining wage labor with the informally employed and the unwaged, see: Mike Davis, *Old Gods New Enigmas: Marx's Lost Theory* (London: Verso, 2018).

³⁰ See: Gavin Mueller, *Breaking Things at Work: The Luddites Are Right about Why You Hate Your Job* (London: Verso, 2021).

clock, dreaming of another possible world and thieving from capital those hours which are meant to be reserved only for the necessary reproduction of one's labor.³¹

As a way of grounding the riotocracy which Melville portrays as a collective political project found in the mutual rejections of capitalist labor and the bourgeois state within a matrix of historical and theoretical modes of revolutionary politics, I suggest that we ought to turn to the commons, the commune, and anti-work, utopian Marxism in order to demonstrate the riotocracy's interrelation with each. Peter Linebaugh's *Red Round Globe Hot Burning: A Tale at the Crossroads of Commons and Closure, of Love and Terror, of Race and Class, and of Kate and Despard* provides perhaps the most theoretically ambitious account of the commons: "The commons refers both to an idea and to a practice. As a general idea the commons means equality of economic conditions. As a particular practice the commons refers to forms of both collective labor and communal distribution. The terms suggests alternatives to patriarchy, to private property, to capitalism, and to competition."³² In Linebaugh's work, the prison, the wage, the plantation, the settler colony, the ship, and the factory all mark sites of the horrifically violent and destabilizing process of enclosure; resistance to enclosure manifests in all those acts, solidarities, and ideas which seek not only to preserve but also to reimagine and bolster what we may hold (again) in common. The

³¹ Rancière's masterful study of the laborers whose aesthetic pursuits and imaginative reveries which in their resistance to simply *being* a worker mark liberatory desires documents this theft of time: "Poverty is not defined in the relationship of idleness to work but in the impossibility of choosing one's fatigue." Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury (London: Verso, 2012), 9.

³² Peter Linebaugh, *Red Round Globe Hot Burning: A Tale at the Crossroads of Commons and Closure, of Love and Terror, of Race and Class, and of Kate and Ned Despard* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019). See also: E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966); E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (New York: The New Press, 1993); Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Brooklyn: PM Press, 2019).

material practices of the commons and the dreams which foster its ongoingness cut against those prolific American ties between property, hierarchy, and whiteness.³³ The riotocracy of Charles's Isle marks a site of the commons, one which attempts to dissolve the hierarchies and separations engendered by regimes of labor and state. I contend that capitalist enclosure does not merely happen once, not a singular era, but rather occurs throughout the entire history of capitalism's development as a world-system, from that creation of the *vogelfrei* dispossessed at the breakup feudalism down to the present day through the continuous (re)creation of the relative surplus population. Privatization, alienation, racialization, and patriarchy all indicate ongoing processes within a capitalist world-system which continually function to enclose what may be mutually held in common amongst a global proletariat. By 1848 when this project begins, the fight for the commons has become rekindled as a struggle for communism even as the project of enclosure had increasingly come to demolish many of the material practices which had once made up the vibrant reality of customs and commons. In this project's period, I describe instances of an improvisatory commons, attempts which carry frequencies of the riotocratic in their manifestations of attempts to make raggedness a material condition for inclusion within an "asylum of the oppressed" made up of the autonomous activities of those on the margins of the wage. These improvisations are ways of reinterpreting the commons through the means available, of refusing the privatized and striking back in whatever manner ready to hand at the enshrinement of the value form.

³³ See: Stefan Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons*; Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); Cedric Robinson, *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Order* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980).

The commons too open themselves upon the commune, that revolutionary form which Joshua Clover argues “appears beyond wage and price because those struggles cease to be possible in any practical sense, because human reproduction in that moment is not to be found in either the workplace or the marketplace.”³⁴ The ragged citizenry of the “universal nation” upon Charles’s Isle can be seen as having instantiated the commune in their revolutionary practice of making the riotocracy “permanent,” a continually renewing and remaking arising out of the excess creative capacities of this “universal nation.” Writing of the Paris Commune, Kristin Ross observes the import of the creation of “communal luxury,” that process through which its motley assortment “by their daily workings inverted entrenched hierarchies and divisions—first and foremost among these the division between manual and artistic or intellectual labor.”³⁵ In tracking the riotocracy in American cultural productions, I look to protean forms which precede that communal luxury which fully breaks down the separation of “manual and artistic or intellectual labor” in order to see how the nebula produces aesthetic capacities out of unwaged time, nebulous figures who attempt, however partial and incomplete and fragmentary, to demonstrate aesthetic capacities which envision other worlds while also occasionally attempting to work towards them via those practices of improvisatory commoning, a challenge to those who would cast wageless life as barren.

³⁴ Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.: The New Era of Uprisings* (London: Verso, 2019), 190. Clover additionally states that the commune today cannot be arrived at *sans* breaking down divisions between the waged and the unwaged: “Within the transformations of the present, the form of the commune is unthinkable without the modulation from traditional working class to an expanded proletariat. That is to say, it is not oriented by productive laborers, but rather by the heterogeneous population of those without reserves. Like the riot, the commune may feature workers but not necessarily as workers.” (189).

³⁵ Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (London: Verso, 2016), 50.

The “no work” and “no wages” of the riotocracy’s nebulous figures also occurs in that “no-place” of the utopian,³⁶ brought into being by those nebulous figures who are the ghosts of political economy, those apparitions who haunt its terrain and imaginary and share something with that “spectre of Communism.”³⁷ I position that riotocracy as what Ernst Bloch refers to as “a dreaming ahead,” an attempt to anticipate a possible future to come.³⁸ Bloch’s theoretical intervention restores to Marxism a vision of “concrete utopia,” an emphasis upon the necessity for emancipatory projects to possess a theory of futurity which vigorously opens itself up to that history which has not yet arrived, not yet found itself fulfilled.³⁹ As Kathi Weeks writes of this strand of utopianism:

Bloch challenges not only the conception of the real that informs such objections to utopianism but also what, as realism, might constitute its adequate representation. After all, the assumption that reality is static, that the future will not be different from the present, is hardly realistic. Realism demands the recognition that there is a future born in every present, and that what it will become is not yet decided. Reality is a process in which we can intervene.⁴⁰

Weeks’s *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* crucially provides a framework not only for a critique of those strands of Marxist thought which have been stuck in the mires of producerism and masculinity, obsessively tying the proletariat merely to labor and reducing proletarian struggles only to those of workers, but

³⁶ “All utopias are in a way texts of negation of the present order, a deep critique of society as a whole as well as of its constituent parts.” Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 61.

³⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Political Writings* (London: Verso, 2019), 61.

³⁸ Ernst Bloch, “Karl Marx and Humanity: The Material of Hope,” in *On Karl Marx*, trans. John Maxwell (London: Verso, 2018), 30.

³⁹ “Upright Carriage, Concrete Utopia,” in *On Karl Marx*, trans. John Maxwell (London: Verso, 2018), 168.

⁴⁰ Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 189.

also for an understanding of how the refusal of work leads outward towards new creative functions: “The passage from the negative moment of refusal to its constructive moment of exit and invention marks the shift from a reactive gesture of retreat to an active affirmation of social innovation.”⁴¹ Weeks’s text demonstrates the necessity of reimagining the form of work itself, and it is this very longing for a world no longer structured upon capitalist forms of labor that this project attempts to discern in the riotocratic desires of nebulous figures.

In drawing out this connection between nebulous figures and the riotocracy within American cultural productions of the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this dissertation attempts to demonstrate the vast variety of major and minor texts in which we observe this phenomenon. Christopher Hill writes that “each generation asks new questions of the past, and finds new areas of sympathy as it re-lives different aspects of the experiences of its predecessors.”⁴² The “new questions” this project attempts to ask of the past have their foundations in the broader structural conditions of its composition. As Colleen Lye and Christopher Nealon have argued, students of “English in the age of deindustrialization” increasingly “find themselves in unexpected proximity to the standpoint of the wageless.”⁴³ In this new closeness to wagelessness itself, Lye and Nealon suggest that the work of Marx has taken on new meanings as well: “For undergraduates and graduate students in the precarious academy today, however, the power of reading *Capital* lies in its capacity to help them connect present-day crises of unemployment, racialized exploitation

⁴¹ Ibid., 100.

⁴² Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 15.

⁴³ Colleen Lye and Christopher Nealon “Introduction: Marxist Literary Study and the General Law of Capitalist Accumulation,” in *After Marx: Literature, Theory, and Value in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Colleen Lye and Christopher Nealon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

and exclusion, gender hierarchy, imperialism and permanent war, and environmental devastation.”⁴⁴ I have found this to be exceedingly true for my own experience in the field, as it has been through that combination of literary studies in the age of deindustrialization and a reinvigorated return to Marx that I have been able to make connections between my own specific relationship to economic precarity and a scholarly pursuit which takes up this experience as a means of discovering “new areas of sympathy” within the past. As a first-generation college student from a working-class family, my parents have found themselves oscillating between employment and its absence, experiencing dispossession, and laboring in outmoded and underpaid fields. I too have known little else besides a precarity in employment, and the absence of stability, continuity, and certainty that this condition brings. The investigation this dissertation undertakes has its roots in these material experiences which have also produced its conviction that the revolutionary dreams of the past offer the means to help shape the futures we collectively struggle for in our present.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter One, “‘In Which a Variety of Characters Appear’: The Ragged Formations of a Nebula,” explores the connection between idleness and *poiesis*, arguing that time unmoored from the strictures of the workday engenders the possibility of creating worlds without work. In a reading of Ernst Bloch via Whitman, I draft the outline of a laborless theory of value; by juxtaposing Melville’s *Confidence Man* and a newspaper report of a confidence man impersonating Melville, I illuminate the interconnected forms of working outside/beyond the wage in Antebellum America; I position James Williams’s *Life and*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

Adventures as detailing an escape from enslavement that appears on a continuum with the ongoingness of an escape from the strictures of wage labor; and Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" opens up the space for envisioning the connective tissue extant between waged labor and unwaged domestic labor as a theft of time to be rectified by a theft from capital. In concert, these texts present an ensemble of nebulous figures that come together in an unruliness bound not in their labor but in their refusal of it, their shared haunting of the province of political economy.

Chapter Two, "“Let Your Tragedy Be Enacted *Here*”: The Walking Riot and Peripatetic Dreams" assembles a vast, multi-genre archive of material on a single nebulous figure excised from the wage relation—the tramp. By critically reading numerous cultural depictions of the migratory unemployed in late nineteenth century North American literature, this chapter delineates what I have termed an aesthetics of tramping, a poetic styling that sees in wageless life the construction of both a writing and an epistemology which threatens to undermine the regime of wage labor. The forms of mutual aid found in the literatures of the tramp carry the potential to reimagine how a community not only sustains itself but also *creates* specifically through the necessities provoked by work's absence.

Chapter Three, "“What Gountry Hass a Poor Man Got...?": The Fallen Idle of the American Novel at the Fin de Siècle" turns to William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* in order to demonstrate how nebulous figures outside the province of wage labor populate the realist and naturalist novel at the turn of the twentieth century. While these novels often attempt to portray the hazard of the wageless to the capitalist order only to later defuse it,

this chapter claims that the riotocracy continually threatens to spill over beyond this strategy of containment. Throughout these novels, the communities of nebulous figures remain unresolved challenges to both the novels' claims of representational totality and to the stability of a capitalist property order.

Chapter Four, “‘This Tramp and Vagrant World’: Seeing the Nebula,” examines a variety of formal strategies of representation which try to depict nebulous figures, each tying those outside the wage relation to an attempt to portray a construction of reality ever more real. Beginning with William James’s *Pragmatism*, I argue that his rhetorical style demonstrates how this philosophical method is enmeshed in a thinking about social inequality and wageless life. Then I look to two pieces of reportage four decades apart, George Foster’s *New York by Gas-Light* and Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*, which each purport to reveal the social reality of nebulous figures in New York City, the former reliant upon their mystery and the latter upon their misery. The final section turns to the Ash Can School’s urban realist paintings which depict nebulous figures without obsessively focusing upon their revelation and Charlie Chaplin’s Little Tramp through which we can see the age of a cultural riotocracy drawing to a close during the onset of the Great Depression.

The “Conclusion” to this project looks to the political afterlife of the riotocracy from the 1930s to the present. It argues that the riotocracy marks a possible pathway for our own contemporary epoch. In the Capitalocene, when unmitigated capitalist growth threatens the futurity of our collective existence, the cultural archive of nebulous figures who in the first wave of American industrialization found themselves already resistant to and on the margins of wage labor and its concomitant ethos of productivity suggest the possibility of building

alternative forms of sociality, collectivities no longer rooted to the spatio-temporal rhythms of work but instead attached to the improvisatory commons of a riotocracy developed out of work's abandonment.

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Chapter I

“In Which a Variety of Characters Appear”: The Ragged Formations of a Nebula

I began to feel almost certain that some of my doings would leak out—that the hour of retribution was close at hand. It had become common talk among all in that part of the town, how Sile Doty could afford to buy and feed so many horses, have so much money, and not do anything.

—Sile Doty, *The Life of Sile Doty 1800-1876: A Forgotten Autobiography: The Most Noted Thief and Daring Burglar of His Time*

In a society such as ours, where responsibility and choice are exalted, where capital accumulation is a duty and cash a sacred cow, what could be more subversive than the readiness to reduce money to mere counters in a game? The gambler’s willingness to throw it all away with merely a shrug of the shoulders could embody a challenge, implicit but powerful, to the modern utopian fantasy of the systematically productive life. The idea that loss is not only inescapable but perhaps even liberating does not sit well with our success mythology, which assumes at least implicitly that “winning is the only thing.”

—Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America*

Moments unspent in laboring hold within them aesthetically productive capacities, surpluses wherein non-work becomes capable of engendering artistic work. Down time acts as the initial catalyst for this scene of transmogrification, a dissonant temporal register to those moments captured in capital’s (work/every)day. The act of writing marks a reclamation of time sounding in assonance with all those other communings begun off the clock. This outside to the terrain of labor stakes a claim on futurity, an instantiation of a world-building begun on new grounds. Idle time is hardly blank. It serves as a period for digging those tunnels through which each passing daydream can be smuggled out of the workday *en route* to its becoming a freedom dream.⁴⁵ This fecund cultivation of free time as poetic time springs forth a continual movement *contra*-work in the shared hope of crafting worlds *sans*-work. The aesthetic remnants and unwieldy possibilities contained in these

⁴⁵ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

recalcitrant, stolen moments, signal the primary objects of this chapter's attentions. So often generated by a so-called surplus population, the creation of this poetic surplus, a patchwork stitched together from/on the fringes of the wage-relation, requires turning our attention to the ragged formations of a nebula, those impromptu and improvisatory groupings continually contracting and expanding their communality. As Cedric Robison notes: "In human thought, there are legends, residues and ghosts of logical systems long ago publicly exorcised, which persist, forming a strand here and there of the tapestry of meaning."⁴⁶ These nebulous figures then mark the nodes by which these strands hang briefly connected as an all too delicate tapestry of meaning, the loci of ley lines which may illuminate transient pathways from the commons to the commune, the byways of the riotocratic.

The nebula always already marks a gap. When Marx writes of the "nebulous figures which do not belong within the province of political economy," they appear in the original as *Gespenster*, ghosts, specters extant in apposition to that specter of communism, figures ushering in the communistic through their activities outside political economy's heavily armed province.⁴⁷ Derrida notes that "as often happens in translations, the ghost drops off into oblivion or, in the best of cases, it is dissolved into approximate figures," and here these nebulous figures, marked by this very dissolution into the approximate, collectively make up the nebula, which entails a spectral plane, one actively haunting the regime of wage labor, an absent presence.⁴⁸ This chapter roughly concerns itself with the period after Marx first

⁴⁶ Cedric Robinson, *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Order* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), 23.

⁴⁷ Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts", *Early Writings*, (London: Penguin, 1992), 335.

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2006), 135.

coined and theorized the politico-historical role of the lumpenproletariat (an attempt at giving material form to these nebulous figures necessarily resistant to it) in 1852's *The Eighteenth Brumaire* and prior to the widespread development and consolidation of the tramp as a predominant category for rendering life outside the wage after the Panic of 1873. Taking the United States (and its encompassing corollaries of areas of territorial expansion and settler colonialism) as the primary space which these *Gespenster* haunt, this chapter attends to a range of literary genres (poetry, novel, memoir, short story) in order to establish a textual conjuncture jointed upon characterizations of nebulous figures and their desertion of the wage in the interregnum between the lumpenproletariat and the tramp. In a reading of Bloch via Whitman we can see the sketches of a ~~labor~~ theory of value developed out of idleness; by juxtaposing Melville's *Confidence Man* and a confidence man's *Melville* we find the development of the multitudinous forms of lives working outside/beyond the wage; James Williams's *Life and Adventures* portrays an escape from enslavement as on a continuum with the ongoingness of an escape from the strictures of wage labor; and Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" opens up the space for envisioning the connective tissue extant between waged labor and unwaged domestic labor as a theft of time to be rectified by a theft from capital. In concert, these texts present an ensemble of nebulous figures that come together in an unruliness bound not in their labor but in their refusal of it, their shared haunting of the province of political economy.

This chapter's aim is fourfold (less in the sense of a chronological unfolding of one onto another but rather that each may in a given case be enfolded upon another). Firstly, in looking to literary depictions of time spent either outside of or underneath the scene of wage

labor (livelihoods dependent upon mutually shared relations to work that have potential to undermine what work currently is), we can track a chronotopic register of a lumpen idleness as subterfuge for a politics in action, an anarcho-communistic assemblage building other worlds set just offstage. Secondly, amidst this backdrop we can note the emergence of a cast of nebulous figures in both the background and the foreground of this textual archive, allowing us to simultaneously observe how this nebula holds together, the linkages of what it holds in common mutuality. At this juncture, we can then start to trace the emergence of an aesthetics arising out of the nebula, a shared set of conventions and practices rooted in these refusals of labor and the subsequent conversion of these unwaged hours into a poetics of free time engendered by (and often despite) the numerous unfreedoms cast upon those outside the wage relation. Finally, we enter into a speculative mode, a speculation at once with and from this archive, in order to envision flashpoints of a riotocracy, barely glimpsable moments in which both an *ethos* and *telos* of these nebulous figures can become a wellspring for the collective reproduction of lives held in common.

To Lean and Loaf(e) at Our Ease

In “The Spur of Work” from his 1930 collection *Traces*, Ernst Bloch notes that the spacetime of non-work provokes a dialectical movement, a negation that in turn induces the possibility of another kind of work altogether. Bloch’s argument turns upon the instability of being idle, the impossibility of continually inhabiting a void apposite to death.: “Doing nothing is attractive to the extent that no one can hold out there. It attracts us because we seem to find ourselves there; it is intolerable because nothing there has really been prepared

yet.”⁴⁹ Bloch ties idleness to loneliness, both “poisons of dark Being Within Oneself [*Insichsein*].”⁵⁰ If a certain form of idleness, that which manifests in the singular, exists in an affective chain linking loneliness to death, the transformation of the utopian kernel extant in idleness relies upon that scene of preparation, ensuring that the moments in which “we seem to find ourselves” allow us to find more than merely ourselves:

Sloth and solitude are the right and left posts of the door in to a house of which so many dream, and where no one could hold out. Where even many artists, with their vocation, have likewise revolted against every kind of boredom. For leisure’s flight from work is none at all, as noted, but only another kind of work. It is war in the enemy territory of idleness itself, an armed attack on the locus of the problem. The labor of the everyday flees intolerable inactivity and subjugates the earth (which it is otherwise inhospitable or unsuitable) so that we can be at home on it. The work of leisure (which is not comfortable or aristocratic, but the terminal concept of all emancipated labor) itself makes order in the gloom of existence; there it builds a house for another time. In the middle of existence it builds this house, where not just the *here you may* but above all the *here you can* of inactivity can finally be our friend (who until now was only disgust or desolation—that is, the very spur to work).⁵¹

In Bloch’s rendering, idleness does not exist solely within the present moment of its occurrence. Neither is idleness a passive non-occurrence. Instead, it occupies the future anterior, the ideational plane wherein the construction of another world begins, the instantiation of a utopian longing’s connective passage to the (socio-historical) conditions of the present. Bloch’s description of idleness and its antinomies arrives in a bellicose formulation. That “war in the enemy territory of idleness itself,” that “armed attack on the locus of the problem” demonstrates both the stakes and methods of this dialectical becoming—combative struggle a necessary means for the realization of what idleness can be.

⁴⁹ Ernst Bloch, “The Spur of Work,” *Traces*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 75.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

His language here, couched in metaphoric register of the material, seizes upon a razing prior to a subsequent building, a clearing out of an enclosure, a levelling and a digging, a moment in which that “very spur to work” gives way to a kicking against the pricks. If “the work of leisure” is in fact “the terminal concept of all emancipated labor,” then communistic currents must be embedded within the spacetime of idleness, welling up in that transition between the “here [we] may” and the “here [we] can,” finally realized when allowance (a freedom granted from on high) becomes possibility (a freedom manifest from an extant set of conditions), when being within oneself is reoriented outwards into simply being-with. The construction of this “house for another time” provides the site of a future occupancy, one which will remake the *oikos* as a site of another becoming, rendered therein out of this new work of leisure; however, until this revolutionary turning occurs, idleness must remain but a temporary refuge:

The temptations of the womb and the grave appear here within each other again: of the embryo that has it quiet, of the corpse that has it deep. But only completed work properly gives birth to us, drives out the poison of being uncooked and perishable. No work has ever been the right one; no rest could therefore ever last. We are not here to eat, but only to cook [*kochen*]; we can eat later, finally. Our Here and Now tastes bad without activity, not least because it could be so superb, and isn't.⁵²

In this piece's final turn, Bloch alerts us to the way in which the inhabitation of idleness as an end in itself finds itself incomplete precisely because “no work has ever been the right one.” Idleness sparks the residual hope that “Our Here and Now” could in fact be otherwise, contaminating the working hours with the omnipresent reminder that something therein remains missing. As Kathi Weeks observes: “Bloch insists that that both modes of temporal reasoning—thinking backward and thinking forward—are necessary for thinking

⁵² Ibid., 76.

the fullness of any one moment in time.”⁵³ Idleness, that which provides respite and reflection on the work just finished and the work inevitably still to come tomorrow, hinges this dual temporal register, a space from which to both craft and articulate utopian longings.

Not only does the spacetime of work’s absence mark the site wherein a daydream may arise to stake its claim to a possible future, it also ruptures the present through the innumerable possibilities manifest within general idleness prior to its expression as a particular iteration of the work of leisure. The present tense of idleness overflows with meaning. It beckons in the guise of an opportunity for ideation to wander and ramble, an opening from which to take one’s time, a taking that always marks a theft from capital. We find this precise prospect, the possibility of a rift opening up in that temporal reclamation, in the opening lines of what will come to be a cornerstone of the American poetic canon but in its initial 1855 run remains untitled and anonymously authored, a song not yet possessed by a “myself” but rather one that invites us to revel in the openness of what has not yet been marked with finality, a decidedly non-working draft in the flux of a declining declination, something that might not even belong to its author:

I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease....observing a spear of summer grass.⁵⁴

⁵³ Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 195.

⁵⁴ Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1982), 27.

This opening ode to a collective epistemology and an atomic existence held in common, a statement of purpose that ensures the reader and speaker will conjointly move forward with a shared momentum, finds itself paused immediately after this sharing has been established. The introductory stanza creates the conditions in which the second can come to be inhabited; thus, if the first stanza sets up a universalist appeal, the subsequent lines develop the specific iteration which this form will take—a directed lazing about. To invite one’s soul to loaf[e], to open up that meandering present to the work of leisure, soon becomes coupled with the repetition of lazing (a loafing once more with feeling) in the conditions of freedom manifest in the ability to lean and loaf[e] at one’s ease, a labor alien only insofar as the rarity of its encounter as a moment of laboring. The estrangement of loafing at one’s ease with soul, the novelty of the work of leisure, gives way to an ellipsis, an embrace of the sheer number of ways in which this idleness can go, the paths which the loafer can travail or not. The ellipsis herein offers up a rendering of the grounds for a riotocracy, a place in which the next work can be a new work, wherein a collective set of endeavors can begin to manifest, the work of leisure giving rise to an aesthetic work(ing) in which what comes after the leaning and loafing can be made and remade so long as a recognition of those shared assumptions of the prior stanza remain intact.

Remarking on these lines, F.O. Matthiessen provides a musing aside tucked away in a parenthetical, a remarking more than reading, that expresses an inability to decipher the enigmatic quality of that “e” tacked onto the end of loaf beyond the recognition that it seems to call out for consideration: “(It is interesting to note that just as Keats took a special relish in writing ‘plumb’ for ‘plum,’ Whitman seems to have felt that his coined spelling of

'loafe' somehow made the experience more expressive.)”⁵⁵ At the very least then, this “e” hails. It provokes a stumbling. It encourages hesitation. It does “somehow ma[k]e the experience more expressive” (which Matthiessen does not contend to concur with and thus posits this as simply Whitman’s fanciful indulgence). The conjoined “e” marks an (expressive experience of) excess, an extension of loafing into an endeavor more than itself, a *poiesis* of exuberant contingencies that would be impossible without the aphiloponous excesses of leaning and loafing as such, those moments which capital’s ideal form of the working day would surely disallow and swallow up whole, would claim as lost time and wasted opportunity, instead become here the very conditions for poetic production. This excess grows into the observation of that “spear of summer grass” which becomes the entryway into the rest of this particular poem, where the leaves of grass of the minor work of twelve anonymous poems grows over four decades to be populated by a multitude of hundreds, where to lean and loaf[e] “at my ease” can itself grow into the first person plural so as we can lean and loaf[e] at our ease and embrace the riotocratic possibilities latent within that subsequent ellipsis.

In the final stanza of the third untitled poem in the 1855 collection, the poem that will become “A Song for Occupations” but is still really a song for ourselves, we find another instance of “loafe” appearing at a critical juncture:

When the psalm sings instead of the singer,
When the script preaches instead of the preacher,
When the pulpit descends and goes instead of the carver that carved the
supporting desk
When the sacred vessels or the bits of the eucharist, or the lath and plast,

⁵⁵ F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1941), 548.

procreate as effectually as the young silversmiths or bakers, or the masons in
their overalls,
When a university course convinces like a slumbering woman and child convince,
When the minted gold in the vault smiles like the nightwatchman's daughter,
When warrantee deeds loafe in chairs opposite and are my friendly companions,
I intend to reach them my hand and make as much of them as I do of men and
women.⁵⁶

In the penultimate line, “loafe” comes to serve as the final and preeminent example of a quality of humanness, an endeavor of communality that holds a value resistant to commodification. To loaf[e] *with* is a relation not yet reified. Those warrantee deeds which lay claim to extant space, transforming it into private property by way of title and contract in order to enclose, have been paired in contrast to the work of leisure which defies the underlying logic of this valuation. That “house for another time” cannot be placed on the market, cannot be mortgaged or rented out. In this instance, loaf[e] once again marks a linguistic addition corresponding to a kind of excess, but here this excess is a surplus value which runs contra a system of work, of capitalist wage labor; instead, it proffers a poetic theorization of a laborless theory of value, or perhaps more accurately, to transpose upon Diane Elson’s inversion, a value theory of laborlessness.⁵⁷ These warrantee deeds, much like Marx’s dancing table, may appear to have those “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties,” the “grotesque ideas” of the commodity form’s appearance; however, their inability to participate in a shared temporal register of loafing, that they cannot be friendly companions precisely because of this inability, shines a light on the communistic registers embedded within this capacity to loaf[e] (for it also matters little as to who held the

⁵⁶ Whitman, “A Song for Occupations,” *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1982), 98-99.

⁵⁷ Diane Elson, “The Value Theory of Labor,” *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2015).

warrantee deeds upon that land where that spear of summer grass grew).⁵⁸ This value theory of laborlessness articulates idleness upon a shared set of conditions latent in the outsides and undersides of accumulation, the mutuality which becomes the catalyst for mutual aid. “A Song for Occupations” resonates dissonantly with the commodity form and the embedded gelatinous mass of labor undergirding it, and instead carries the undertones of a chord ringing harmoniously with a practice of engagement (to loaf[e] with) that is always already resistant to subsumption by an occupation, a residual reminder that we are not the work that we do and that what we do always extends further than mere production. To lean and loaf[e] is to participate in a jointly held aesthetic project in which the shared, collective work of leisure fosters an ability to construct a future commons, one which will invalidate the very structure of private property and its set of corollary violence(s) that makes those warrantee deeds so inhuman. In the value theory of laborlessness, we glimpse a possibility for both a politics and a poetics that grow out of a nebulous bond, a linkage rooted not in the value created by a work traded for a wage but in the utopian moments when work becomes rejected in lieu of a shared dreaming.⁵⁹

“Strangers Still More Strange”

Another anonymous author, albeit one whose real name we will not come to know, will engage with this very poetics of free time, crafting a story from the dreamscape of the idylls of idleness. Reported in the *New York Journal* in 1850, this author has crafted a masquerade, writing into existence what this brief blurb will refer to as a “Curious Fraud.”

⁵⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 163.

⁵⁹ To transpose upon Marx again, this formula could resemble something like: Loaf—Dream—Loaf(e)

Its curiousness most pronouncedly lies in the uncertainty of its ends, the underlying motivations that would lead this man to indulge in a theatrical reimagining of himself as an author of seafaring novels. Here we have a living forgery, a utilization of textual corpus as the basis for establishing a new existence paradoxically stamped with a seal of veracity via a set of fictions:

Curious Fraud: Personating the Author of “White Jacket.”—It appears that some individual ambitious of notoriety has become enamoured of the good name and reputation of our townsman, Herman Melville...and has been so far successful in his attempts to pass himself off for that gentleman, in remote parts of Georgia and North Carolina, that persons near the scene of his exploits have been induced to correspond with the Messrs. Harper, of this city, Mr. Melville’s publishers, for the purpose of getting reliable information on the subject of this stranger’s claims to the authorship of Mr. Melville’s books. It is believed by many that Herman Melville is the assumed name of the author of *Typee*, &c. This is not the fact. Herman Melville is the real name of the writer of those works. His residence is in this city, where, we believe, he was born. His father, Allan Melville [sic], a merchant of great probity, has not been forgotten by his contemporaries in business in this city thirty years since.⁶⁰

That “some individual” would undertake these acts of deception merely for being “ambitious of notoriety” and “enamoured of the good name and reputation” of Herman Melville suggests that the writer of this reportage has struggled to discern what impulses could have given rise to this masquerade beyond the possession of an outsized curiosity to know a kind of fame; however, a desire simply for notoriety would hardly seem a fitting motivation for a performance only functionally operative if its fundamental untruth remains hidden.

The trick of confidence relies on maintaining a baseline of believability, moving within a strict set of parameters that ensures the erasure of those doubts through a fleshed-out narrative, a reliance on a thick description utilized at the behest of necessity. At the very

⁶⁰ Jay Leyda, *The Melville Log* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1951), 377-8.

least, this inhabited deception only works if both the performer and the subject of the performance are strangers to those in the “remote parts of Georgia and North Carolina.” The report fails to identify, however, the specifics of this con, what kind of “exploits” this man engaged in and what he sought to accomplish by spinning this prolonged yarn. What did this stranger *do* while performing the role of Melville? Did he merely proclaim himself as the author of these novels in rural alehouses to explain why he was not seen at work? Were requests made for a few rounds or a few favors in exchange for some additional, unpublished stories of a peep at Polynesian life? Was he in the habit of providing a behind the scenes look of his next novel so as to explain his wanderings about the Southern states as a venture in garnering inspiration and new material? Could he have asked for a few meager dollars to hold him over until his publisher straightened out the payments on his latest work, *White Jacket*? And what event finally produced enough doubt in a listener/mark to ensure that they wrote to a New York City publisher to obtain that “reliable information on the subject of this stranger’s claims to the authorship of Mr. Melville’s books”? Was this score too big or had he simply finally met someone who had known the sea firsthand and discerned some small but essential fact to be definitively amiss? Melville’s next book would be *Moby Dick*. What this mysterious stranger would go on to subsequently produce, the imaginings he may have had for a future that must have seemed inaccessible under his own name and required the stamp of another, if the way he crafted his life may have produced a masterpiece in its own right (one still to be discovered amid the great unread of lumpen, ragged lives and yet to be canonized), we can only begin to guess at from this scant entry. At the very least though, we can know that his exploits, in whatever form they may have taken,

signal a break in a thermodynamic logic of value in their attempt to conjure up something from nothing, becoming an author merely by proclamation, an escape from the work of writing those novels in order to craft the fiction of a new life on an already established ground, a making of the privatized sphere of a name into a shared commons.

The Herman Melville who actually penned these novels (that were themselves a refashioning of bits and pieces of the autobiographical) may have been a stranger to this curious fraud, but he was certainly not a stranger to the less curious fraud of re-nominalization. While the *New York Journal* article claims that “Allan Melville, a merchant of great probity, has not been forgotten by his contemporaries in business in this city thirty years since,” a crucial piece of information lingers therein, an unintentional supplement. After Allan’s bankruptcy and subsequent death in 1832, his widow Maria Gansevoort added an “e” to the family name, an appendage that would try to reinvigorate a patrilineal descent tainted by credit defaults.⁶¹ Embedded in the Melvill(e) name is an attempt to restore confidence, and its presence here in a piece praiseful of its “probity” demonstrates a successful piece of theatre. As Michael Paul Rogin insists: “The marketplace was the arena of masquerade, where values fluctuated, and nothing was as it seemed. There each bourgeois hid his own self-aggrandizing purposes behind a confidence-inspiring exterior. There contractual relations replaced the claims of the heart.”⁶² That many believed Herman Melville was an assumed name of the author would not seem then to have been altogether incorrect. The mysterious stranger taking up the Melville name in remote parts of Georgia

⁶¹ Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

⁶² *Ibid.*, 27.

and North Carolina merely extended the logic of a practice already in use by the Melville(e)s, disrupting a distribution chain materially rooted in the genealogical, familial line and communalizing its use, a theft of inherited property, a labor beyond the waged engaged in by “strangers still more strange.”⁶³

We should not assume that this particular theft served as the singular, fecund progenitor of Melville’s 1857 novel *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* any more than another story which appeared in an 1850 *New York Herald*, “A Confidence Man in the Custom House,” detailing a New York custom-house clerk named Pierre who made off with “import duties intended for the government.”⁶⁴ (Melville himself would eventually go to work in the New York custom-house, closing a temporal loop as another confidence man therein). Regardless, *The Confidence-Man* demonstrates a sustained engagement with the phenomenon of a singular moniker holding a multitude within itself. If, as C.L.R. James suggests, the heroic protagonists of the *Pequod* are its crew, the representatives of a global(ized) proletariat, an “Anacharsis Cloutz deputation [of] the meanest mariners, renegades and castaways [who] remain sane and human, in their ever-present sense of community,” I contend that the collective protagonists of *The Confidence-Man* are extant within a nebula aboard the *Fidèle*, bound together through a shared engagement in (re)producing and (re)fashioning lives joined together through their mutual refusals of waged labor, making up a lumpen contingent only barely visible through the aperture of their running a shared con underneath

⁶³ Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 13.

⁶⁴ Rogin, 255.

the narrative guise of the singular and titular confidence man.⁶⁵ While James sees the Anacharsis Cloots deputation on the *Pequod* as “a world-federation of modern industrial workers” who “owe no allegiance to anybody or anything except the work they have to do and the relations with one another on which that work depends,” Melville in *The Confidence-Man* remakes this very grouping into the entirety of the cast of character shipboard on the *Fidèle*:

Natives of all sorts, and foreigners; men of business and men of pleasure; parlour men and backwoodsmen; farm-hunters and fame-hunters; heiress-hunters, gold-hunters, buffalo-hunters, bee-hunters, happiness-hunters, truth-hunters, and still keener hunters after all these hunters. Fine ladies in slippers, and moccasined squaws; Northern speculators and Eastern philosophers; English, Irish, German, Scotch, Danes; Santa Fé traders in striped blankets, and Broadway bucks in cravats of cloth of gold, fine-looking Kentucky boatmen, and Japanese-looking Mississippi cotton-planters; Quakers in full drab, and United States soldiers in full regimentals; slaves, black, mulatto, quadroon; modish young Spanish Creoles, and old-fashioned French Jews; Mormons and Papists; Dives and Lazarus; jesters and mourners; teetotalers and convivialists, deacons and blacklegs; hard-shell Baptists and clay-eaters; grinning negroes, and Sioux chiefs solemn as high-priests. In short, a piebald parliament, an Anacharsis Cloots congress of all kinds of that multiform pilgrim species, man.⁶⁶

In this conglomerate, “whose type is the Mississippi itself” mirrored here as “one cosmopolitan and confident tide,” we can observe a movement from a world of production, the global industrial factory and its proletarian labor force on the *Pequod*, to the realm of the marketplace, circulation, credit and debt, and economic financialization.⁶⁷ The *Fidèle* marks the site of what Foucault terms heterotopias, “counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are

⁶⁵ C.L.R. James, *Mariners, Renegades, & Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2001), 48.

⁶⁶ Melville, 14.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”⁶⁸ As “the ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*,” the *Fidèle*’s allegorical heft lies precisely in this ability to invert the real, material spaces modeled in this miniature, and by extension, the power relations embedded in the social spheres of those spaces.⁶⁹ As Cesare Casarino puts it:

The ship embodies the desire that produces heterotopias, that calls the space of heterotopia into being: the desire to escape the social while simultaneously representing it, contesting it, inverting it—the desire to exceed the social while simultaneously transforming it. Such a paradoxical desire functions always on the brink of its own undoing...It is, in other words, at the historical moment when a tendentially global and increasingly unified world system comes into being that the concept of heterotopia as well as the very concept of space undergo, of necessity, other and further-reaching metamorphoses.⁷⁰

The heterotopia of *The Confidence-Man* enacts an imagining of the world turned upside down, a text in which Marx’s grand listing of the lumpenproletariat in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* becomes refracted through the “mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror” of the carnival funhouse, condensed into the carnivalesque masquerade of the confidence man, displacing through dissemblance the revanchist counter-revolutionary impulses Marx found embedded within this class relation and instead cultivating a break in which these nebulous figures share dreams of the riotocracy.⁷¹ What concerns us here is the ways in which this nebulous grouping emerges out of the cosmopolitan tide of this particular Anacharsis Cloots congress as actively engaged in production but of an alternative sort to the allegory of the global factory, a production instead of a minor utopia carved out of the excesses of a financialized marketplace, lives made out of the spill off of the Mississippi, itinerant flows

⁶⁸ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowick *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Spring: 1986): 24.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷⁰ Cesare Casarino, *Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 28.

⁷¹ Foucault, 24.

which attempt to answer the question “what are the conditions of survival of modern civilization.”⁷²

The Confidence-Man opens upon a tripartite confluence of literatures that will serve as its undergirding tributaries. The first has been prominently displaced aboard the *Fidèle*, a piece for a general readership, a short work that in its brevity fails to properly develop its character:

...a placard near the captain’s office, offering a reward for the capture of a mysterious impostor, supposed to have recently arrived from the East—quite an original genius in his vocation, as would appear, though wherein his originality consisted was not clearly given; but what purported to be a careful description of his person followed.⁷³

“As if it had been a play-bill, crowds were gathered about the announcement” parsing out the description of a one act theatrical production to come, the specifics of the part to be played, and whether to expect a comedy or a tragedy, remain unknown.⁷⁴ That the “originality” of this performance could not be adequately elucidated by the description highlights that a successful trick of confidence relies in the actor’s ability to make the performance look as naturalistic as possible and to craft a tale that is necessarily a genre piece, familiar in its locatable tropes but novel enough not to read as plagiarism, with the corollary knowledge that any breaking of the fourth wall may surely lead to a blown performance and the invocation of a policing function insistent that any one person has but a single part to play. The second literary tributary flows into the first. Within the crowd gathered about the wanted poster in an act of public reading, an unnamed salesman attempts

⁷² James, 20.

⁷³ Melville, 7.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

to extend their piqued curiosity to his own wares, dime novels which purport to contain the stories of other nebulous figures, fugitives linked in their criminal endeavors whose exploits have been negated by the coming of the law, now thought to be safely contained and reified within the closed bounds of so many picaresque tracts:

...while another peddler, who was still another versatile chevalier, hawked, in the thick of the throng, the lives of Meason, the bandit of Ohio, Murrel, the pirate of the Mississippi, and the brothers Harpe, the Thugs of the Green River country in Kentucky—creatures, with others of the sort, one and all exterminated at the time, and for the most part, like the hunted generations of wolves in the same regions, leaving comparatively few successors; which would seem cause for unalloyed gratulation, and is so to all except those who think that in new countries, where the wolves are killed off, the foxes increase.⁷⁵

This encounter, between the dime novel which has codified its riotocratic subjects into objects of an historical past and the wanted poster-cum-play-bill announcing the invocation of another tale still to come, signals an adaptation, wherein the threats to private property and the state no longer appear in the same fashion. These new threats, strangers still more strange, have cloaked themselves in semblances not yet recognizable, not yet comfortably situated. These dime novels, “something of a stolen literature”⁷⁶ with a “radically collectivist practice of authorship,”⁷⁷ reflect the nebulous figures of *The Confidence-Man* more clearly than their purported subjects of lone bandits and fraternal thugs, the riotocracy enacted in the midst of the *Fidèle*'s heterotopia a prime marker of “a certain experience of participation without belonging,”⁷⁸ a joint crafting of resistance in a (dis)harmonious collection of multiple

⁷⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁶ David Kazanjian, “The Dime Novel,” *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Volume 6: The American Novel 1870-1940*, ed. Priscilla Wald and Michael A. Elliott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 274.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 282.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 288.

soundings. The final conjoining flow stems forth from the deaf-mute traveler who has boarded sans any encumbrance of travel, who “was, in the extremest sense of the word, a stranger,” who may or may not be that particular mysterious imposter from the East but whose own strangeness holds him in common with regardless.⁷⁹ He crafts a scene of public writing and reading as a conjunction to the placard, not as a mere addendum but as a recontextualization which draws forth the communistic currents of this confluence, writing on a chalkboard “Charity thinketh no evil,” “Charity suffereth long, and is kind,” “Charity endureth all things,” “Charity believeth all things,” and “Charity never faileth,” in succession, “the word charity, as originally traced, remained throughout uneffaced, not unlike the left-hand numeral of a printed date, otherwise left for convenience in blank.”⁸⁰ The invocation of charity as a constant, as the subject which begets an upending of market relations (no longer an upending of the money changers’ stalls but rather the very attachment to money as such that is marked herein by those hawking money-belts amid the crowd so that they may hold onto their wealth all the tighter), demonstrates an appeal to a millenarian possibility of revolution, one that stresses “a socialist motivation grounded on the insistence that men were divine agents” rather than “the fractious and weaker allegiances of class.”⁸¹ This stranger draws a linkage between himself and the wanted confidence man, positioning this composition within a tradition of those earlier masterless men, “the victims of enclosure, vagabonds, criminals” who turned to a radical Christian hermeneutic, the remnants of that

⁷⁹ Melville, 7.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁸¹ Cedric Robinson, *An Anthropology of Marxism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 139.

communism announced via the declaration of *omnia sunt communia*.⁸² The emphasis on charity posits a radical redistribution, one in which the flows of capital's gains upward become disseminated outwards, and just like the earthquake in 1812 that caused the Mississippi to briefly run backwards, reversing the established order of things, this too heralds a flow inverted. After making his appeal, the deaf-mute stranger merely reclines upon a spot on the deck and naps, leaning and loafing at his ease, another author of a stolen literature.

The novel introduces the menagerie of the nebula through the disabled, black beggar/showman/musician Black Guinea who catches alms thrown in his mouth. When the crowd (led by a man “who may be some discharged custom-house officer, who, suddenly stripped of convenient means of support, had resolved to be avenged on government and humanity by making himself miserable for life, either by hating or suspecting everything and everybody”⁸³) begins to question his authenticity and discovers he lacks any “documentary proof, any plain paper about him, attesting that his case was not a spurious one,”⁸⁴ he lists those who can vouch for him, figures whose individual cons will make up the bulk of the novel: the gentleman with a weed, the gentleman in a gray coat and white tie, the gentleman with a big book, the herb-doctor, the gentleman in a yellow vest, the gentleman with a brass plate, the gentleman in a violet robe, and the gentleman who is a soldier.⁸⁵ It is this list itself which the misanthropic man who appears a “discharged custom-house officer” points to as

⁸² Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 20.

⁸³ Melville, 17.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 18

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

an impossibility, bluntly asking: “Did ever beggar have such heaps of fine friends?”⁸⁶ He even suggests that this man is not even black. That a disabled, black pauper on a Mississippi steamboat could have compiled a network of confidants and comrades becomes not only the central inquiry of the misanthrope’s suspicions and doubts but the hinge upon which the rest of the novel will turn, asking the reader to query the possible veracity of this claim, instilling the perpetual doubt as to whether the confidence man is a singular entity or a plurality of operators. As Walter Johnson claims:

The era’s emblematic tricksters—the con men, gamblers, and escaping slaves—embodied the fears of a world in which identity had been unmoored from geography, in which people could turn up in the most unlikely places, in which certainty was a fantasy and plausibility served as the coin of the realm, in which anyone could be vouched for and no one could be trusted.⁸⁷

We see in this novel not merely a thematization of these fears but rather a heightening and extending of them, a suggestion that these nebulous figures may in fact have forged connections amongst themselves, created their own world wherein a beggar could be at the nexus of mutual association and “have such heaps of fine friends.” The mere possibility of the formation of such a network stands as more noteworthy than the specific petty cons that follow. The instability of this list, its inability to provide any definitive information beyond a potential set of connections among those whose labor revolves around a fictive self-fashioning of their lives, allows it to circulate like a note from an unknown bank, its value lying in a belief in its credulity. While the figures listed begin appearing and running their particular confidence games (for less and less paltry sums) in a chronological order, never

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸⁷ Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 150.

seen together but the subsequent arriving just as a former disappears, the purported order stumbles and eventually breaks. Like Bulkington who appears in brief only to drift into the general mass of shipboard labor on the *Pequod*, the gentleman in the yellow vest and the gentleman who is a soldier never appear outside of the initial testimony; instead, they disappear into the nebula, actors offstage whose exploits remain unknown and unknowable beyond their shared relation within the initial list. That “something further may follow of this masquerade” is all but assured, a dissonant final note that issues forth a reminder of this missingness, that we as readers have hardly seen everything.⁸⁸ Rogin suggests that this ending signals a movement of the reader to the outside of the text, an alert that “reality has been absorbed into the fictitiousness of the text.”⁸⁹ I would add that it also acts as a harbinger of an absorbed reality that has not yet been arrived at, a moment of “an anticipatory illumination” embedded in the possibility of a riotocratic world built by a ragged contingent who have refused the protocols of wage labor.⁹⁰ Something further may follow because an excess still lingers, a surplus seized by the “utopian function,” a prologue (un)written in the remote parts of Georgia and North Carolina that hints at another imagined future.⁹¹

“The Wildest Notions”

The excess of a possible future heralded but ultimately diverted (and yet still beckoning) marks the narratological underpinning of W. E. B. Du Bois’s 1935 *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*. Within this text, Du Bois introduces his historical

⁸⁸ Melville, 298.

⁸⁹ Rogin, 254.

⁹⁰ Ernst Bloch, “The Conscious and Known Activity within the Not-Yet-Conscious, the Utopian Function,” *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 111.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

rendering of the American Civil War as a moment in which the enslaved had freed themselves through a mass movement, a collective action of refusal and abandonment, a work which positions “the General Strike of Black slaves as one part of the struggle of a necessarily international working class of color.”⁹² In the chapter on “The General Strike,” Du Bois includes a quote from John Eaton, who had been appointed as head of General Ulysses S. Grant’s Department of Negro Affairs and would go on to be a Commissioner of the United States Bureau of Education, portraying the scene of this general strike within the Union encampments:

“Their condition was appalling. There were men, women and children in every stage of disease or decrepitude, often nearly naked, with flesh torn by the terrible experiences of their escapes. Sometimes they were intelligent and eager to help themselves; often they were bewildered or stupid or possessed by the wildest notions of what liberty might mean—expecting to exchange labor, and obedience to the will of another, for idleness and freedom from restraint. Such ignorance and perverted notions produced a veritable moral chaos. Cringing deceit, theft, licentiousness—all the vices which slavery inevitably fosters—were hideous companions of nakedness, famine, and disease. A few had profited by the misfortunes of the master and were jubilant in their unwonted ease and luxury, but these stood in lurid contrast to the grimmer aspects of the tragedy—the women in travail, the helplessness of childhood and of old age, the horrors of sickness and of frequent death. Small wonder that men paused in bewilderment and panic, foreseeing the demoralization and infection of the Union soldier and the downfall of the Union cause.”⁹³

Du Bois frames Eaton’s assessment as the “new and strange problems of social contact,” noting that “the army of fugitives were soon willing to go to work; men, women, and children” and that “very soon the freedmen became self-sustaining and gave little trouble.”⁹⁴ However, within this quote, Eaton evinces a fear of this revolutionary moment, one that sees

⁹² Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 170.

⁹³ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 69-70.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

within the black general strike something like the demands for “communal luxury” that will stem forth from the Paris Commune less than a decade later.⁹⁵ Within the black communards of the general strike, Eaton observes those “possessed by the wildest notions of what liberty might mean.” Eaton notably positions this moment of possession as a possession “by” these “wildest notions” rather than “of” them, failing to understand that the utopian desire for the enactment of these notions is here a radically collective self-possession engendered by the material conditions of the black general strike. As Cedric Robinson positions this movement in his reading of *Black Reconstruction*: “The revolution had *caused* the formation of revolutionary consciousness and has not been caused by it. The revolution was spontaneous.”⁹⁶ What Eaton considers to specifically constitute the “wildest notions of what liberty might mean” does not require speculation as he immediately follows up with their content, an “[expectation] to exchange labor, and obedience to the will of another, for idleness and freedom from restraint.” These riotocratic aims, the anticipation of an ability to inhabit that idleness which is the terminal concept of all emancipated labor, mark the point at which the general strike spills over into the commune, the tide which Eaton frets must be dammed lest it gain greater strength in the translation of the utopian function of refusal into collective demand. By placing Eaton’s observations within the context of the general strike, Du Bois fosters the possibility for reinterpreting “the wildest notions of what liberty might mean,” an invitation for an alternative hermeneutic, one which would see in this claim a genuine political desire of those formerly living under the conditions of chattel slavery in

⁹⁵ Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (London: Verso, 2016).

⁹⁶ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 238.

their moment of rebellion, a dream of what could be commonly created from a position of “idleness and freedom from restraint.”

“The wildest notions of what liberty might mean” circulate during the general strike, but they also mark a historical atmospheric, one that permeates the relationship between blackness and labor under the conditions of a white supremacist property order. Which is to say that these notions do not *only* appear within a singular flashpoint of a mass uprising, but rather that they mark a wellspring of particular manifestations of a variety of freedom dreams that imagine the overturning of the racialized regime of labor. In James Williams’s *Life and Adventures*, “an autobiographical narrative that he began in 1869, published in 1873, enlarged in 1874, and reprinted in 1893,”⁹⁷ we find the (re)articulation of “the wildest notions of what liberty might mean” as that which cuts against the connective tissue extant between slavery and a so-called free labor, exceeding the temporal bounds of a neat periodization of antebellum/postbellum and instead illustrating a continuity in an experiment with the “[expectation] to exchange labor, and obedience to the will of another, for idleness and freedom from restraint,” a demonstration “that the freedom experienced was in the search and not the destination.”⁹⁸ “John Thomas Evans, (*formerly*),” who is “*Now* James Williams”⁹⁹ (another instance of re-nominalization brought on by a moment of self-fashioning as subterfuge) crafts his memoir as a narration of movement, one that begins with his escape from his master William Hollingsworth in 1838 at the age of thirteen: “Seeing the

⁹⁷ Edlie Wong, “Comparative Racialization, Immigration Law, and James Williams’s *Life and Adventures*,” *American Literature*, Vol. 84, no. 4, (Dec. 2012), 801.

⁹⁸ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 151.

⁹⁹ James Williams, *Fugitive Slave in the Gold Rush: Life and Adventures of James Williams*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

difference between freedom and slavery, I made up my mind that when I was old enough I would run away.”¹⁰⁰ If “blackness operates as the modality of life’s constant escape and takes the form, the held and errant pattern, of flight,” Williams’s *Life and Adventures* narrates his flight as one punctuated by always already leaving work, each job merely a stepping stone in a long peregrination elsewhere.¹⁰¹ Williams claims that Hollingsworth thought he would surely return to bondage and had merely gone on a spree, but as Williams adds, “the spree he thought I had gone on was never over until the year 1868.”¹⁰²

Williams’s memoir records a vast employment history, from 1838-1868: work for a variety of private individuals, work mowing, work for the Underground Railroad, work in a brickyard, work in the coal mines, work in a hay-yard, work as a seller, work in the ice cream and fruit business, work in a boarding-house, work as a cook on a freight-barge, work as a pastry cook on a steamer, work as a porter, work cleaning rooms shipboard, work in the mines, work carrying the hod, work as a restaurateur, work begging, work as a sailor, work as a private watchman, work on the levee, work as a junk-store proprietor, work driving an express wagon, work transporting and selling provisions, work buying and selling lots of property, work as the agent and collector for churches, work whitewashing, work as the proprietor of a grocery store, and finally, work as an author. Work acts as a temporal marker in Williams’s memoir, each year punctuated by a descriptor of what kind of labor he happened to be engaged in at the time. While each job acts as a way station from which Williams will eventually move on (frequently sans the full wages he is owed), the glittering

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰¹ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 51.

¹⁰² Williams, 5.

specter of goldmining looms largest over his *Life and Adventures*. The opening of the gold mining regions in the American West (the other American 1848), marked a curious double bind for capital, as observed by Jacques Rancière:

It was not hard for the workers, in fact, to learn the reasons for Capital's generosity: they had no need for its services. What 'instruments of labour' did it provide, apart from those machines for extracting and washing gold that were obligingly exhibited in Paris, but which everyone in America knew were no use at all? A pickaxe, a bucket and a sieve—that was all the capital the gold-seekers needed. And as for the healthy food, medical care and protection that were promised, didn't everyone know that the climate was highly salubrious, food cheap and crime unknown? The greedy capitalists were victims of the same diabolical logic as the generous Icarians! To attract new recruits they had to extol the charms of the climate, the fertility of the soil, and the easy life under the American sky. But all they attracted in this way were potential deserters, if the description was true, or future rebels, if it was false. The emigrants had therefore to be spurred to disciplines and patient work. But who would go such a way in search of that?¹⁰³

Williams, a deserter and a rebel, arrived westward due to his own double bind, a fugitive slave who could be subject to capture and re-enslavement after the 1850 passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. He does not recount discovering gold; instead, his narrative lingers on another discovery, an ushering into a momentary participation in lawmaking, an opening in which he can contribute in building and legislating that force of law which had heretofore been a source of enslavement, violence, and persecution which had driven him westward in the first place: "We had no law in the country at that time and we miners constituted a law for ourselves."¹⁰⁴ Williams comes to this collective "we" through the site of labor, conjoined through the shared conditions of being a miner. However, in the subsequent description of

¹⁰³ Jacques Rancière, "The Gold of Sacramento: Capital and Labour's Californian Adventures," *Staging the People: The Proletarian and His Double*, trans. David Fernbach, (London: Verso, 2011), 60.

¹⁰⁴ Williams, 23.

this lawmaking and enforcing, Williams seems hesitant to extol the virtues of this foray into policing:

I was one of the miners that was present on an occasion to try another miner for the crime of stealing \$50 from another. We put a rope around his neck and intended to frighten him, and he said if we let him down he would tell. So we let him down and he went and got the money. Had he not got the money, what the results would have been I am unable to tell the reader. One thing I am about to affirm, I would never have consented to have taken that man's life. I was the only colored man in the crowd, and it was left for me to pass my opinion, and I said, "If he gives up the money let him go," for I felt greatly opposed to taking the man's life; yet in a body of men there are always different opinions, and I do not think the poor fellow would have had much lenity shown to him, it being thought a very dastardly trick for one miner to steal from another.¹⁰⁵

Williams notes a paradox within this spontaneous workplace democracy. While he has not been excluded from contributing his opinion to the makeshift jury on the basis of his race, he has simultaneously witnessed a moment in which his own desire for leniency could easily have been ignored since "in a body of men there are always different opinions." That this thieving miner may have just as easily been hanged despite Williams's protestations demonstrates the limits of this form. It is not that he discovered a riotocracy, that anarchic negation of the force of law that finds in lawlessness the undergirding of the commons, out among the miners, but rather that his participation in this impromptu democracy has opened up the door for his cathecting onto riotocratic aims:

Any man that has made up his mind to go to the mines at that time, he must be a man that feared no noise, or else he had better stay at home, for the miners feared no noise at that time, it being a newly-settled country, with wild beasts and also wild people. I belonging to the party that believed in liberty, it made me a little wild also. Persons living in places where they have to be a law to themselves are, of course, nearly or quite as apt to resort to very stringent laws as the more sure remedy to

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

lessen crime. Whether it be the fact or not, it requires thought, as time expounds all miracles, and it takes time to tell about that.¹⁰⁶

Williams seems to echo Eaton in his claim that by “belonging to the party that believed in liberty,” he has been made “a little wild also,” an instantiation of “the wildest notions of what liberty might mean” as here rooted in a skepticism towards that excess of law crafted in the normative law’s absence. While “Williams adapts the slave narrative’s hallmark skepticism of the law and its ability to administer justice to the racial geopolitics of the American West,” the wildness of his belief in liberty manifests in his willingness to simply up and leave it behind, to move on to another job, his disenchantment with the law tied to his disenchantment with any one particular employment.¹⁰⁷ Williams seems to discover “idleness and freedom from restraint” precisely in the moments in between employments, when he can move between, momentarily unencumbered. Williams, having lived in the interstices of legality, a knowing that freedom cannot be merely legislated, also seems to provide a condemnation of the worksite as a vantage from which freedom can be known:

However, the state of things is much better now in California than was the case on my arrival there. Many adventures have been made by persons from the States, colored and white. There are now instances on record where both classes have gathered considerable of this world’s goods. Some are now enjoying the benefits of their labor, whilst others, who worked hard in the mines and have gathered a large portion of this world’s goods and have had no advantage, neither will they ever reap any advantage hereafter from their privations, although they have borne the burden in the heat of the day—collected the spoils; but, ah, they have sown sparingly—they have sowed the good seed sparingly, I mean; but ill-gotten means never stay long with the receiver. Some have plundered and robbed, perhaps I may say truthfully, murdered; anyway, just so that I get—no matter about the remaining—just so I get my booty, I have never for a moment thought of wronging any one out of their dues. That is what made me so bitter against slaveholders. By reading this book, ere this you are convinced that I have been bitter against such men. But for the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Wong, 801-3.

Emancipation Proclamation I should be the same this day, although, like many others, I have been accused through life falsely.¹⁰⁸

Williams has witnessed in the gold mining regions of the American West a theft of labor that he frames as an extension of slavery's extractions, an identification of its continuities within a capitalist world-system. Here, the plundering, robbing, and murdering has ensured "ill-gotten means," a movement of surplus value away from labor and has become for Williams analogous with the hierarchical relations of bondage, a means of "wronging [someone] out of their dues." This exploitation has also fostered a concomitant belief in an eventual overturning. As "ill-gotten means never stay long with the receiver," he couches a faith in the ongoing possibility of a systemic reversal of the flows of wealth. In the moment of staggered repetition, "just so that I get—no matter about the remaining—just so I get my booty, I have never thought of wronging any one out of their dues," he espouses a position against accumulation, a willingness to leave that wealth which remains behind, since this surplus marks the connection between the characteristics of slavery and capitalism, the collective thefts of dues unduly stolen.

Later in the memoir, he will again expound upon the faults of legalism, stating both that "the poor men of the United States do not get justice at law as the rich man does"¹⁰⁹ and that "I have seen more law in California than any other part of the world which I have traveled in, but, according to my belief, *little justice*."¹¹⁰ That a surplus of law holds with it a corollary of a lack of justice, a disconnect heightened by poverty, marks the space which holds "African enslavement, Chinese exclusion, and Indian removal" as interconnected

¹⁰⁸ Williams, 23-4.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 47.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 51.

“tragic expressions of the constitutive violence of Americanization and western incorporation” within Williams’s narrative.¹¹¹ Williams, having been a made a little wild also by his membership in the party that believed in liberty, crafts a narrative which has a corollary lack of restraint, a text which moves at variable tempos, lingers in contradiction, introduces threads only to just as quickly abandon them, and in each expanded edition defies any edict to neatly conclude. Even his text refuses the doldrums of situated stillness, seeing in the ongoing expansion of settler colonialism and capitalism in the American West processes which themselves continue in motion and necessitate remaining fleetfooted to not be trampled. The last appended entry comes in the form of a song, “The Christian’s Voyage through Life and Death.” The chorus “We’re out on the ocean sailing,/Homeward Bound we swiftly glide;/We’re out on the ocean sailing/To a home beyond the tide” is at once a Christian paean to divine deliverance and an encapsulation of a dream of an elsewhere “beyond the tide,” a utopic space as of yet unknown.¹¹² Williams’s own perpetual motion seems a fitting accompaniment to this allegory, finding the material for aesthetic production in the unwillingness to remain in stasis. As Harney and Moten argue: “Knowledge of freedom is (in) the invention of escape, stealing away in the confines, in the form, of a break. This is held close in the open song of the ones who are supposed to be silent.”¹¹³ For Williams then, the upwelling of a desire for “idleness and freedom from restraint” that Eaton saw within the general strike has been translated into the (re)invention of escape, in the desire for work to simply be a catalyst for another move, one that would not be spatially

¹¹¹ Wong, 818.

¹¹² Williams, 113.

¹¹³ Harney and Moten, 51.

bounded, one that would evade the growing force of law which brings with it no justice, an attempt to remain nebulous so as to be dispersive as a resistance to a living merely as a living labor that would consume him if ever he stayed too long.

“The Outside Outlines”

Rebecca Harding Davis’s story “Life in the Iron Mills,” originally printed in *The Atlantic* in April 1861, lingers in nebulosity, acutely attuned to the limitations of knowing that which can only be partially apprehended, a vague sketch of a living enshrouded in a haze that the narrative’s gaze will continually try (and fail) to cut through even as it relishes in a self-conscious obscurantism. The work’s narrator provides a first-person limited omniscient point of view, continually emphasizing an ability to know everything about the story’s primary characters and nearly nothing about all of those other figures orbiting around them. Yet this knowing nearly nothing morphs into a knowing everything, an emptying out of an interior that the narrative will propose has in fact already been emptied out by the conditions of poverty, a way of employing a literary withholding and uncertainty as an analogous claim on behalf of a kind of verisimilitude. “Life in the Iron Mills” introduces itself in its opening lines as a text rooted in a scene-setting that will also become its strategy of narrativization: “A cloudy day: do you know what that is in a town of iron-works? The sky sank down before dawn, muddy, flat, immovable. The air is thick, clammy with the breath of crowded human beings. It stifles me.”¹¹⁴ Here we find the Malthusian sublime, a natural world made horrific through the sheer presence of the laboring crowd, an invocation of a crowd all too crowded, of a mass, that which Emily Steinlight claims “calls for a constituency where there

¹¹⁴ Rebecca Harding Davis, *Life in the Iron Mills: And Other Stories*, (New York: Feminist Press, 1985), 11.

are no recognized terms of common identity, a collective subject that has no proper or predetermined mode of representation.”¹¹⁵ The nebula appears in Davis’s story both an environmental condition beget by the material form of industrialized production that is the *raison d’être* of the town’s shared existence and as the grouping of nebulous figures whose lives the narrative can neither distinguish and disentangle from one another nor from their labor and thus become merely another, impenetrable layer of opaque fog. “The idiosyncrasy of this town is smoke,” as is the idiosyncrasy of Davis’s story.¹¹⁶ The obsession of the scene-setting with portraying a “skin and muscle and flesh begrimed with smoke and ashes” amidst an “air saturated with fog and grease and soot” demonstrates a repetitive insistence upon this conflation between environment and being, a collapsing of internal and external through the stressed confluence of poverty as pollutant.¹¹⁷ The narrator contends:

Can you see how foggy the day is? As I stand here, idly tapping the window-pane, and looking out through the rain at the dirty back-yard and the coal-boats below, fragments of an old story float up before me,—a story of this old house into which I happened to come to-day. You may think it a tiresome story enough, as foggy as the day, sharpened by no sudden flashes of pain or pleasure.—I know: only the outline of a dull life, that long since, with thousands of dull lives like its own, was vainly lived and lost: thousands of them,—massed, vile, slimy lives, like those of the torpid lizards in yonder stagnant water-butt.¹¹⁸

In looking out through the fog, the narrator arrives at the story, one contiguous with the fog in that it has no “sudden flashes of pain or pleasure,” a narrative that can provide “only the outline” of a singular life that is itself contiguous with “thousands of dull lives like its own.”

The narrator’s reliance on a metonymic relation, that the singular life can stand in for all

¹¹⁵ Emily Steinlight, *Populating the Novel: Literary Form and the Politics of Surplus Life*, (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2018), 22.

¹¹⁶ Davis, 11.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

those others of which it shares membership through a shared dullness, articulates these nebulous figures as resistant to description, that only “the outline” of a single figure can in any way be illustrated emphasizes a lacuna at the center of this form of looking—a sight struggling to apprehend from its specific vantage (here, that of the middle class reformer) and thus concluding (in an extension of the logic of policing) that there is nothing to see here.¹¹⁹ This trope will repeat itself again later:

If you could go into this mill where Deborah lay, and drag out from the hearts of these men the terrible tragedy of their lives, taking it as a symptom of the disease of their class, no ghost Horror would terrify you more. A reality of soul-starvation, of living death, that meets you every day under the besotted faces on the street,—I can paint nothing of this, only give you the outside outlines of a night, a crisis in the life of one man: whatever muddy depth of soul-history lies beneath you can read according to the eyes God has given you.¹²⁰

“The outline of a dull life” has now become the “outside outlines of a night,” a further distancing and removal and another contrapuntal mirroring of the metaphoric registers of these lives with their environment as environ. Even as the narrator reaches out for the language of the material, the text circles back continually to its restrictive ability to only provide a portrait of a penumbra, a temporally and spatially bounded glimpse of a “soul-history.” “Massed, vile, slimy lives” attempts to characterize these figures as solid, the language intended to emphasize a revulsive, haptic *unheimlich*, that turning of the Gothic’s horrors into a genre based in the “reality of soul-starvation” evidenced in the physiognomy of the crowd that requires an archaeological removing from the “muddy depth of soul-history,” a continual attempt at solidifying the transcendental; however, the figurative language of the gaseous continues to be that which provokes the contingency of

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

unknowability, the resistance to a representational form that could tightly capture, the foggy, smoky haze only collapsing through a proximity that the narrator avoids even as the principle of conjoint contamination via a closeness becomes the explicitly stated goal of this revealing: “This is what I want you to do. I want you to hide your disgust, take no heed to your clean clothes, and come right down with me,—here, into the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia. I want you to hear this story. There is a secret down here, in this nightmare fog, that has lain dumb for centuries: I want to make it a real thing to you.”¹²¹ The narrator and the reader share a class position, one in which they both possess clean clothes that will be dirtied in this descent into the inferno of labor found in the works, a descent that will be mirrored by the strangers given a tour of the mill by the son of one of its owners that will provide the hinge upon which the narrative turns. In the latter descent, one of the wealthy observers will find himself pickpocketed. The narrator’s rendering of the reader of this story will end up pickpocketed as well, told the reality of the situation lies in a misapprehended appearance of things, viewing the nebula and concluding it only an undifferentiated conglomerate, seeing only quiet passivity in a portrayal of poverty and thus forgetting that “silence is as often conspiracy as it is consent,” focusing intently on the narrative as tragedy and missing that it is already farce.¹²² The fog limits the vision of the narrator but it also creates an atmosphere in which these nebulous figures can exceed their limited descriptions, concealing themselves and their aims, living in what appears to be enclosure whilst meanwhile dreaming of a levelling and digging, a set of tensions running

¹²¹ Ibid., 13-14.

¹²² Anne Boyer, “No,” *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate*, (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018), 10.

through the entirety of the story engendered by the depiction of an infrapolitics in action, “a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name.”¹²³

The title of the piece is certainly a misnomer, as little living actually occurs amidst the iron mills, just a portrait of something like a “living death,” a set of laborers who are only laborers and thereby incapable of variance.¹²⁴ Even when they swerve from the predetermined path, they seem unable to create a break from which the future may be radically different, only a slight bend. However, this portrayal of poverty as “an ontology, more than a response to social situation, that emphasizes morality and behavior at least as much as economics” marks a failure to depict the contours of proletarian life only if our hermeneutic is necessarily oriented towards a particular standard of mimetic representation in which labor’s relationship to the means of production exists as the centralizing force by which we establish a metric of representational accuracy.¹²⁵ As a depiction of the reformer’s imaginary of the causal determinacy of the fate of the poor to remain as such because of an ontological difference and thus as a mimetic representation of what the bourgeois gaze *sees* (which is necessarily a combination of both what they wish to see are allowed to see) as the totality of life as labor, “Life in the Iron Mills” certainly succeeds. In a literary depiction that desperately seeks to expose the reality of poverty, Davis’s story depicts the bourgeois anxiety of unknowability of the nebula, the ways in which attachments are made within and without the wage relation so as to eventually abscond from it altogether, in an attempt to translate

¹²³ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 19.

¹²⁴ Davis, 23.

¹²⁵ Gavin Jones, *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 36.

discontent into a quietism, to demonstrate the helplessness of those who furiously pull on their bootstraps only to find them forever wanting. The narrator introduces the primary characters, the Wolfes, as easily understood: “Their lives were like those of their class: incessant labor, sleeping in kennel-like rooms, eating rank pork and molasses, drinking—God and the distillers only know what; with an occasional night in jail, to atone for some drunken excess.”¹²⁶ Life here can be reduced to labor, the food necessary to reproduce their ability to labor, and the occasional “excess” easily corralled by a repressive policing function. And though the narrator immediately follows up with the inquiry “Is that all of their lives?—of the portion given to them and these their duplicates swarming the streets to-day?—nothing beneath?—all?,” the implication of what else constitutes their lives remains in the realm of the ideal rather than the material, a pained yearning that desires otherwise but cannot act on this idealism’s behalf.¹²⁷ Yet from the very moment the narrator enters into a direct rendering of the Wolfes, this discontinuity between imagining a life otherwise and making a life otherwise begins to fall apart, becoming increasingly murky in the “secret underlying sympathy between that story and this day with its impure fog and thwarted sunshine.”¹²⁸

We first see Deborah Wolfe arriving home with her compatriots, women who like herself work at the cotton mill. Among this group, an unnamed “mulatto” woman and an unnamed Welsh woman invite Deb to a ball that night. Though Deb declines, these others stake their claim that they will “have a night of it!” and that “there’ll be lashin’s o’ drink,—

¹²⁶ Davis, 15.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 14.

the Vargent be blessed and praised for ‘t!’” Even as the unnamed “mulatto woman” “inclin[es] for a moment to show fight, and drag the woman Wolfe off with them,” they all eventually leave Deborah to her night.¹²⁹ In this brief interaction, two rebellions appear, mutually ongoing in the background, both unseen and offstage. The first arises out of the plans these women have made for the night itself, a scheming in common for an all too brief saturnalia, one that will reject the meager offer of capital for a brief period of rest and rehabilitation prior to the inevitable return to the cotton mills, an infrapolitical practice that possesses as “an experimental spirit and a capacity to test and exploit all the loopholes, ambiguities, silences, and lapses available to them”¹³⁰ The ball is a site for sharing the mutual commons of “drunken excess,” a place where the rebellious speech of discontent and utopian longings can comingle, and these women can break the rhythms of labor by engaging in the rhythms of dance. “Life in the Iron Mills” has no place for the ball as it exists outside of the drudgeries of work, marking an alternative world that has the potential to spill out and disrupt the staid assumptions of the singular aspect of poverty as nothing but lack. The subsequent rebellion revolves around the unnamed “mulatto” woman who briefly contemplates insisting that Deb join them. Not only a display of affection and solidarity, this act attempts to drag Deb away from her subsequent laboring, the unwaged labor of the domestic sphere which constitutes her second shift, another worksite upon which to further exhaust herself. She wishes for Deb to abandon this subsequent labor, to revel with her coconspirators and temporarily dislodge the patriarchal logic that insists on Deb’s further workings. In writing on the presence of the double bind of the gendered division of labor

¹²⁹ Ibid.,16.

¹³⁰ Scott, 138.

and its relation to the unwaged, Silvia Federici points towards the necessity for reordering our very understanding of labor so as to both note the continuum of the multitudinous valences of what it means to labor and reimagine the breadth of what an opposition to the temporalities of the workday consists of:

“...we can work with Marx’s categories, but we must reconstruct them and change their architectural order, so that the center of gravity is not exclusively wage labor and commodity production but the production and reproduction of labor power, especially that part of it that is carried out by women in the home. For in doing so, we make visible a new terrain of accumulation and struggle, as well as the full extent of capital’s dependence on unpaid labor and the full length of the working day.”¹³¹

The unnamed Welsh woman and the unnamed “mulatto” woman demonstrate a rebuttal of the wage labor form (in their insistence to eschew the rejuvenation of rest for the seeking of pleasure) and of an unwaged domestic labor (in their attempt to convince Deb to shirk off her obligations at home). Minor insurgences, these actions that call out to be registered on the same spectrum as Hugh’s aesthetic reworkings and Deb’s theft, refusals of *life* in the cotton and iron mills to merely be *work* in the cotton and iron mills, a cobbling together of riotocratic actions which seek to undermine labor through attempts to build a momentary mutual commons out of an abandonment. As Deb returns to her unwaged nightshift, she thinks to herself: “Man cannot live by work alone.”¹³² While Deb will feed Janey (whose father has been jailed and who Hugh has told never to stay alone, a glimpse of the solidarity ongoing within the community) and leaves to take food to Hugh at the iron mills, the knowledge that she “cannot live by work alone” will act as the force which will upend the material state of things as they are. It is Deb who commits the theft. While the narrative and

¹³¹ Sylvia Federici, “Marxism, Feminism, and the Commons,” *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, (Oakland: PM Press, 2019), 156.

¹³² Davis, 17.

the men it concerns itself with will be looking at Hugh and the woman he has carved from korl, Deb rests amidst the iron works, “lying there on the ashes like a limp, dirty rag,—yet not an unfitting figure to crown the scene of hopeless discomfort and veiled crime.”¹³³

Through simile, Deb has come to appear as the material form of lumpenness, “a limp, dirty rag,” outside of the wage relation at the site of her work at the cotton mill she has taken on the guise of mere raggedness. Yet, it is precisely in this presumed quality of lumpen raggedness that allows her nebulosity to drift out of the narrative’s sight, leaving her behind as merely a representative of a type, hidden in the background unnoticed because of a seeming unthreatening nature until she reveals to Hugh that she has stolen Mitchell’s “small green pocket-book containing one or two gold pieces, and a check for an incredible amount, as it seemed to the poor puddler.”¹³⁴ Deb has carried through on the mutinous energy of the two unnamed women who left the cotton mill with her, crafting a riotocratic rebuttal against work as such during those brief hours outside of the workplace, attempting through the theft of this money to obtain a way out of her double duty as both provider for social reproduction in the domestic sphere and spinner twelve hours a day, six days a week at the mill. She has attempted to create the conditions by which she can live by more than “work alone,” a purchasing of free time and idleness, an opening through which she can come to engage in a *poiesis*, making living anew beyond work, beyond the mills.

¹³³ Ibid., 21.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 44.

In Rancière's *Proletarian Nights*, he contends: "Poverty is not defined in the relationship of idleness to work but in the impossibility of choosing one's fatigue."¹³⁵ Hugh Wolfe exemplifies this impossibility, a puddler in the iron mills who from the "great heaps of the refuse from the ore after the pig-metal is run," tries his hand "in his off-hours from the furnace" at "chipping and moulding figures,—hideous, fantastic enough, but sometimes strangely beautiful" out of this kohl prior to ritualistically "breaking it to pieces perhaps, in a fit of disappointment."¹³⁶ Hugh's statuary exists as an ephemeral monument to stolen time, a means of ensuring that these hours that constitute a break in work simultaneously mark a break in what constitutes the source of his fatigue. Hugh transforms refuse, the kohl that is the byproduct of his labor, into a classical aesthetic form made with lumpen material. By refusing to allow his idle moments to replenish his laboring strengths, Hugh embraces idleness as the progenitor of another working, a making something from nothing, from the kohl which has no value for capital and from those off hours that capital would have been merely preparation for the ongoing labor on the clock. When the son of one of the mill owners (Kirby), a town physician (Dr. May), an overseer at the mill (Clarke), Kirby's brother-in-law, "a stranger in the city,—spending a couple of months in the borders of a Slave State, to study the institutions of the South" (Mitchell), and an unnamed northern journalist tour the iron mill and come across his latest (and thus unbroken) statue of a woman cut from this kohl, they find themselves both astonished at the artistic working and baffled by the

¹³⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury, (London: Verso, 2012), 6.

¹³⁶ Davis, 24.

combination of medium, subject, and artist.¹³⁷ They find before them an epistemological puzzle, one that bucks against that essentialism particular to capitalism which would suggest that an iron puddler is only an iron puddler. The bourgeois gaze struggles to make meaning of the korl work. May thinking it “a working-woman,—the very type of her class” asks Hugh what the statue signifies.¹³⁸ Hugh only responds that “She be hungry.”¹³⁹ When May follows up with a critique, that the work possesses “the mad, half-despairing gesture of drowning” and does not adequately articulate hunger, Hugh follows up that the subject is “Not hungry for meat.”¹⁴⁰ Mitchell, impetuously chastising May, claims to have arrived at its proper meaning, arguing: “It asks questions of God, and says, ‘I have a right to know.’”¹⁴¹ However, neither can register that hunger cuts across both the material and ideal, that to hunger for the means to modify the conditions under which the ideal can be developed requires the utopian kernel of idleness from which one can choose their fatigue. Hugh knows this sure enough when he leaves the mill with Deborah: “Home,—and back to the mill! He went on saying this over to himself, as if he would mutter down every pain this dull despair.”¹⁴² Home and back to the mill evokes those spatio-temporal rhythms of the workday that Hugh continually hoped to shift with each sculpture, these pieces being the punctum from which a new improvisation could momentarily arise in contrast. Once Deb has given Hugh the stolen money, he immediately begins to conceive of the world as a commons: “A thief! Well, what was it to be a thief? He met the question at last, face to face, wiping the clammy drops of

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 33-4.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 41.

sweat from his forehead. God made this money—the fresh air, too—for his children’s use. He never made the difference between poor and rich.”¹⁴³ Once “a consciousness of power stirred within him,” he realizes he need not attend his next shift at the mill.¹⁴⁴ The power registered lies precisely in the autonomy of being able to skip out on work, to walk about in embrace of an idleness form which he can at last choose his fatigue.

That Hugh and Deb will be ensnared by capital’s policing function and thrown in jail for their dual role in the theft has been all but ensured by the narrative’s sentimentality towards their inevitable fall. Hugh’s jailer recounts that after his sentencing, “he just looked up, and said the money was his by rights, and that all the world had gone wrong.”¹⁴⁵ Hugh’s suicide will signal his final revolt, “a dull old bit of tin, not fit to cut korn with,”¹⁴⁶ another tool employed towards a purpose alternate to capital’s: ““Death as refusal requires as its material only life, which if rendered cheap enough by the conditions that inspire the refusal, can become precious again when selectively and heroically deployed as a *no*.”¹⁴⁷ While Eric Schocket’s argument that Davis’s story revolves around the coalescing and redemption of whiteness as an organizational principle contra-class, one which evokes “the promise that the working class will not be forever excluded from the political and social prerogatives of nineteenth-century white skin privilege,” is certainly an astute and necessary interpretation of Davis’s rhetorical styling, the aporias running through “Life in the Iron Mills” prevent this ideological underpinning from being the endgame of its characters whose primary

¹⁴³ Ibid., 47.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 51.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 57.

¹⁴⁷ Boyer, 11.

attachment is to the abandonment of the wage labor form altogether and in striking out against private property make an attempt at undermining a key facet of white supremacy's material relations.¹⁴⁸ Even as the narrator's rhetoric attempts to promise the congealing of this whiteness into a liberatory form, these characters cannot be removed from that initial portrayal of the nebula as an obfuscation of the narrator's looking, that which has hidden their riotocratic ends, that which has ensured they have failed to neatly fit within this narrative's structural schema, perpetually resistant figures exceeding the Davis's political ends. The narrator, in keeping that statue of the korl woman, "the white figure"¹⁴⁹ with its "flesh-tint,"¹⁵⁰ tucked away in their library asks whether "the power of its desperate need" has "commanded the darkness away," believing it merely one more *objet d'art* to sit alongside others in a canonical ode to whiteness.¹⁵¹ However, the narrator has again been unable to discern the underlying facets of the nebula as Hugh made each statue only in order to later destroy them, to defy their coalescence into anything akin to the permanence of an institution. The utopian element of these works laid in their cyclical creation and destruction as the continual rebuttals to the working day, their transient impermanence a product of the need to continually hold onto the reclamations of time. Just as Mitchell insists that "this lowest deep—thieves, Magdalens, negroes" will find liberation "with the light filtered through ponderous Church creeds, Baconian theories, Goethe schemes" and eventually find

¹⁴⁸ Eric Schocket, *Vanish Moments: Class and American Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 36.

¹⁴⁹ Davis, 31.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

“their own light-bringer,—their Jean Paul, their Cromwell, their Messiah”¹⁵² even as he fails to grasp that the riotocracy’s tactical strengths lay precisely in its leaderless nature, having his pocket picked by a woman he has simply overlooked, this story’s narrator misinterprets the very story they have laid out, seeing in “the broken cloud to the far East, where, in the flickering, nebulous crimson, God has set the promise of the Dawn” without realizing that the freedom dreams of a world turned upside down, those utopian schemes, have been all along fomenting during the idleness of the night.¹⁵³

Coda

More than three decades after the anonymous poet was no longer anonymous and those untitled works in which we glimpse the working out of a value theory of laborlessness have been marked with their titular names (and no longer subject to the innumerable possibilities built into the prospect of being able to bear another), Whitman found himself wary of a growing contingent of the itinerant unemployed following the Panic of 1873 and the concurrent uptick in strife between capital and labor in the United States. In his notes for “The Tramp and Strike Questions,” constituting “Part of a Lecture proposed, (never deliver’d.),” he opens with an echoing of Marx and Engels:

Two grim and spectral dangers—dangerous to peace, to health, to social security, to progress—long known in concrete to the governments of the Old World, and there eventuating, more than once or twice, in dynastic overturns, bloodshed, days, months, of terror—seem of late years to be nearing the New World, nay, to be gradually establishing themselves among us. What mean these phantoms here? (I personify them in fictitious shapes, but they are very real.) Is the fresh and broad

¹⁵² Ibid., 39.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 65.

demesne of America destined also to give them foothold and lodgment, permanent domicile.¹⁵⁴

These twin specters offer a bifurcation of that specter of communism haunting Europe into the questions of the tramp and the strike, what Whitman calls the “social and economic organization, the treatment of working-people by employers, and all that goes along with it—not only the wages-payment part, but a certain spirit and principle, to vivify anew these relations.”¹⁵⁵ The “demesne of America” invokes a feudal property relation, of the lands held by the lord, which suggests America as consonant with an extreme stratification of property.

He goes on to note the violence engendered by the accumulation of capital:

...in Europe the wealth of to-day mainly results from, and represents, the rapine, murder, outrages, treachery, hoggishness, of hundreds of years ago, and onward, later, so in America, after the same token—(not yet so bad, perhaps, or at any rate not so palpable—we have not existed long enough—but we seem to be doing our best to make it up.¹⁵⁶

He suggests that “in what are call’d the poorest, lowest characters you will sometimes, nay generally, find glints of the most sublime virtues, eligibilities, heroisms” and thus that from these “strange quarters” must the solution to this conflict be sought.¹⁵⁷ In his contentions that the prominence and proliferation of “vast crops of poor, desperate, dissatisfied, nomadic, miserably-waged populations” may signal “our republican experiment...at heart an unhealthy failure,” Whitman latches onto the figure of the tramp as the harbinger of a potential revolutionary overturning.¹⁵⁸ In this figure, Whitman’s democratic vistas may

¹⁵⁴ Whitman, “The Tramp and Strike Questions,” *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1982), 1063-4.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1064.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1065.

become translated into riotocratic vistas stemming from the “strange quarters” where the “poorest, lowest characters” can further develop those “most sublime virtues, eligibilities, heroisms.” He concludes these ominous notes with a brief addendum:

Feb., '79—I saw to-day a sight I had never seen before—and it amazed, and made me serious; three quite good-looking American men, of respectable personal presence, two of them young, carrying chiffonier-bags on their shoulders, and the usual long iron hooks in their hands, plodding along, their eyes cast down, spying for scraps, rags, bones, &c.¹⁵⁹

What has made Whitman serious has been the disconnect between ostensibly “good-looking,” “respectable,” “young” men and their occupation of picking through “scraps, rags, bones, &c.” in a search for value therein. This dissonance, however, fails to note that though unwaged, this laboring he has witnessed marks merely another entry in “A Song for Occupations,” another laboring many of the jobless will undergo. What he does not witness though, is the manner in which this material condition will serve as a continuation of the utopian impulses that may be dreamt within this particular form of loafing, one which will revel in the possibility of expanding “my ease” to “our ease.” In the next chapter, we will move on from the articulation of the variety of characters making up the cast of nebulous figures and how they variously track resistances to wage labor in order to focus upon the ways in which a singular iteration of the nebula, the tramp, comes to serve in the decades following the Panic of 1873 as the locus point of the riotocracy, both a material position outside of the wage and a position from which a challenge to the form of wage labor itself will be articulated on.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

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Chapter II

“Let Your Tragedy Be Enacted *Here*”: The Walking Riot and Peripatetic Dreams

More than twenty attempts to burn the city of Cleveland have been made during the past ten days. The capitalistic press ascribes it to the presence of so many unemployed, discontented laborers. Quite likely.

—*The Alarm*, Vol. 1, Oct. 4, 1884

Tramps who were refused food at the home of John Ovenbeck in the town of Friendship, Winnebago County, entered the barn at night and cut the throats of 3 cows, which bled to death. A card attached to the horns of one bore the following message: “Remember us when we call for something to eat again.”

—*Badger State Banner*, 9/21/1893 [Quoted in Michael Lesy, *Wisconsin Death Trip*]

The nonworker is the major actor in the drama of the city’s slums. In this city’s backwash of flotsam and jetsam, milling in the street, are underworld men of almost every known description: drunkards, gamblers, dope fiends, grafters, derelicts, criminals, panhandlers, jack rollers, sex perverts, paupers, con men, beggars, butt-ends of humanity—actors whose world has gone by.

—Frank O. Beck, *Hobohemia*

The city is inexhaustible. And to master it one must indeed be either a vagabond poet or a poet vagabond.

—Jean-Paul Clébert, *Paris Vagabond*

On October 4th, 1884, the first issue of *The Alarm*, a Chicago based, English language newspaper published by the International Working People’s Association (IWPA) and edited by Albert Parsons and Lizzie Swank, ran a series of clarion calls to the disenfranchised wage-worker on their front page. These exhortations begin with short, unattributed lines, existing somewhere in the register between aphorism, didactic rejoinder, and slogan. The upper left column consists of a series of fragments, held together primarily by a thematic reliance upon the rhetoric of enslavement and revolt: “Not to be slaves is to dare and do...The slave asks himself: ‘Is life worth the living?’...In the name of law, authority and government the human race is enslaved...‘The ballot is the freeman’s weapon.’ Yes, to be sure; but of what use is it

to the slave? Besides, freemen do not need it.”¹⁶⁰ If the paper’s titular moniker indicates both a warning and an urging of revolutionary violence (“*all’ arme!*”, or, “to arms!”), signaling the temporal immediacy of crisis ongoing, these opening salvos simultaneously register the struggle over the condition of wage labor as necessarily linked to both antebellum and postbellum black freedom movements (the general condition of a “human race...enslaved” synecdochally extended to the particular condition of black voting enfranchisement in the “freeman’s weapon”). The contemplative existential quandary posed by the question “Is life worth the living?” marks not only an affective orientation cathected to despair(ing) but also a mode negated only by the rupturing surplus of action contained in the infinitive possibility “to dare and do.” Legislative fiat cannot bestow freedom since “freemen do not need it” just as “law, authority and government” cannot bar entry into a freedom known in daring and doing. “To dare and do” punctuate a sequential necessity whereupon the crafting of a transgressive ideal is to be made materially manifest, a planning and plotting both pragmatic and utopian followed by the actions that can craft and stage its conditions of possibility. “To dare and do” is then to (day)dream and create, an injunction on behalf of a radical *poiesis*.

This chapter looks to a heterodox collection of texts in order to probe what kind of archival trace this injunction has left on a singular figuration of the lumpenproletariat—the tramp. In the subject of the migratory unemployed, the discursive strategies deployed to depict this figure highlight an instability at its core: often portrayed as both a social grouping poised to upend the stability of the regime of wage labor as a revolutionary mass and a lone individual prone to the whimsical fancies of daydream and wanderlust. This entanglement

¹⁶⁰ *The Alarm*, Vol. 1, Oct. 4, 1884.

marks the central aim of this chapter—to discern and elaborate an aesthetics of tramping, a poetics of revolutionary movement.

Dynamism and Dynamite

Three articles on the front page of *The Alarm* have headlines framed as address. In between “To Our Reformers” and “To Working People” is Lucy E. Parsons’s “A Word to Tramps,” and while the former two have been reprinted from other sources, this page contains the inaugural publication of Parsons’s piece (later reprinted as a leaflet by the IWPA). The title itself already sets this article apart, indicating not simply a direct writing “to” but “a word to,” a suggestion connotative of brevity, gravity, and care (notably lacking the sternness of lecture conveyed in “a word with”). The piece opens by means of crafting its audience, declaring that the tramps which Parsons wishes to say “a word to” are “the 30,000 now tramping the streets of this great city.”¹⁶¹ While the 30,000 Chicago unemployed have been referenced multiple times on the front page, another fragment acknowledges that when seasonal labor dries up and the bitterly cold wind off the lake sets in, the scale of this audience will only increase: “It is said that 70,000 workingmen will be out of employment in Chicago next winter. What are they going to do about it?”¹⁶² Published in October, that cold winter will soon arrive. The “they” in question remains necessarily ambiguous, opening up the possibility of a contested subject position, a “they” of the capitalist class and their armed protectors or a “they” of a collective subject to come, the 70,000 who will be on the tramp and shivering. Parsons’s sentence moves from an enumeration to a second-person description of those “with hands in pockets, gazing listlessly about you at the evidences of

¹⁶¹ Lucy Parsons, “A Word to Tramps,” *The Alarm*, Vol 1., Oct. 4, 1884.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

wealth and pleasure of which you own no part, not sufficient even to purchase yourself a bit of food with which to appease the pangs of hunger now gnawing at your vitals.”¹⁶³ This portrait illustrates a reversal of the tramp’s most central signifier, motion. This tramp has been momentarily held in stasis, frozen, with idle hands and idle gaze, unmoving and contemplative, extant somewhere between the stillness of one who is reading closely and one who is dying slowly. A peripatetic subject without any possible destination, the tramp Parsons speaks to exists on a precipice, fundamentally unsure as to whether this life is in fact worth the living, since the wage relation that allows for one to make a living, has been denied.

Shifting from the Chicago tramp to “the hundreds and thousands of others similarly situated in this great land of plenty,” Parsons devotes the bulk of the piece to a series of questions to her reader in an attempt to illustrate that the “industrial system” as such bears the responsibility for disenfranchisement.¹⁶⁴ The rhetorical heft of this piece relies upon demonstrating the relatability and breadth of the conditions which give rise to unemployment as a revelation of their general character. Parsons’s technique attempts to establish narrative as the mechanism through which the tramp can see their situation as intimately and irrevocably interconnected to all of their compatriots outside of the wage-system. This narrativizing circles back to the opening scene-setting, harkening to the spatio-temporal motif of the approaching winter months: “Now, when all these bright summer and autumn days are going by, and you have no employment, and consequently can save up nothing, and when the winter’s blast sweeps down from the north, and all the earth is

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

wrapped in a shroud of ice...”¹⁶⁵ The cyclical boom and bust of a capitalist world-system has been diegetically rendered as a seasonal succession in which the tramp, caught in the dead of winter’s dearth finds suicide the last possible move in this endgame scenario:

Next winter, when the cold blasts are creeping through the rents in your seedy garments; when the frost is biting your feet through the holes in your worn-out shoes, and when all wretchedness seems to have centered in and upon you; when misery has marked you for her own, and life has become a burden and existence a mockery; when you have walked the streets by day, and slept upon hard boards by night, and at last determined by your own hand to take your life...”¹⁶⁶

It is at this moment, when the progression of events seems directed towards an all too plausible tragedy that Parsons intervenes on behalf of the injunction “to dare and do”, taking up this call as one necessitating a speculative modality in order to envision an alternatively possible future, a movement akin to what Shelley Streeby has identified as a radical(ized) sentimentality.¹⁶⁷

Parsons calls for a rewrite of the expected conventions, in defiance of cliché, “fold[ing] late nineteenth-century literary devices into a gothic horror story of betrayal and revenge.”¹⁶⁸ She asks that her tramp reader to “halt before you commit this last tragic act in the drama of your simple existence.”¹⁶⁹ Rather than dying in “the cold embrace of the lake,” she suggests a conflagration as the only fitting conclusion to this particular act, a way of thawing the icy stillness of history by writing a new part for the tramp, casting them as the avant-garde of a riotocracy. In order for this action to begin, Parsons suggests that tramp

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Shelley Streeby, *Radical Sensations: World Movements, Violence and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

¹⁶⁸ Jacqueline Jones, *Goddess of Anarchy: The Life and Times of Lucy Parsons, American Radical* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 101.

¹⁶⁹ Parsons, “A Word to Tramps.”

embark on one final perambulation, to look again at the bourgeoisie's private property and to this time see it as transmutable:

The waves will only dash over you in mockery of your rash act; but stroll you down the avenues of the rich, and look through the magnificent plate windows into their voluptuous homes, and here you will discover the *very identical robbers* who have despoiled you and yours. Then let your tragedy be enacted *here!* Awaken them from their wanton sports at your expense. Send forth your petition, and let them read it by the red glare of destruction. Thus when you cast "one long, lingering look behind," you can be assured that you have spoken to these robbers in the only language which they have ever been able to understand; for they have never yet deigned to notice any petition from their slaves that they were not *compelled* to read by the red glare bursting from the cannons' mouths, or that was not handed to them upon the point of the sword. You need no organization when you make up your mind to present this kind of petition. In fact, an organization would be a detriment to you; but each of you hungry tramps who read these lines avail yourselves of those little methods of warfare which Science has placed in the hands of the poor man, and you will become a power in this or any other land.

*Learn the use of explosives!*¹⁷⁰

In Parsons's adoption of the didacticism of a propaganda of the deed, her biographer Carolyn Ashbaugh sees a culmination of sorts, as "all the oppression which Lucy suffered for her dark skin and her womanhood went into the anger with which she encouraged the use of dynamite."¹⁷¹ This tragedy, the one enacted right "*here,*" on the domestic doorsteps of capital, shifts the register from *pathos* to *logos*; additionally, it reimagines Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" via its allusive citation, making elegy over into paean, invigorating the following stanza's line "Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires" with a freshly insurrectionary tenor.¹⁷² Rather than finding comradely comfort together around a fire in a hobo jungle, the tramp in this performance finds comfort in "this kind of

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ Carolyn Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons: An American Revolutionary* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), 55.

¹⁷² Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" in *Works in Prose and Verse Vol. 1*, ed. E.W. Gosse (London: Macmillan and Co., 1884), 71.

petition” that alights wealth into a glowing and smoldering beacon to gather around. If the tramp needs no organization to undertake this act, the completion of the detonation signals a moment wherein power can develop from it, the networks off the main stems becoming underground circuits for a mobile cadre of the dispossessed. As Jeffery Clymer notes in analyzing the Chicago anarchists’ celebrations of dynamite: “This obsessive return to the drama of dynamite accorded it a rhetorical power that undoubtedly exceeded any effect that an actual blast could have produced...An orchestrated bombing catastrophe promised to entirely and miraculously remake American society...”¹⁷³ While Clymer engages the “drama of dynamite” as primarily attached to the rhetorical heft of the terroristic threat which promises “the resolution of social dilemmas in a single arbitrary and symbolic flash that immediately transforms the very basis of a society,” attending to the articulated combination of this “drama of dynamite” with the “drama of [a tramp’s] simple existence” points towards a unique generic conjuncture—the anarchistic and the aphiloponous.¹⁷⁴ The moment of admixture in this issue of *The Alarm*, when the radical *poiesis* of daring and doing intervenes in the simple existence of the down and out in a palimpsestic writing, this riotocratic ensemble, signposts both a genre and a hermeneutic, much like the hobo scratching markings into a fencepost to alert those in the know as to the characteristics of the property owner just down the lane. The principle of relation holding this literary/cultural/archival nebula together relies upon seeing the tramp as evocative of potentialities as yet unfinished, a cultural figure in defiance not only of the wage relation but of patriarchal domesticities,

¹⁷³ Jeffery A. Clymer, *America’s Culture of Terrorism: Violence, Capitalism, and the Written Word* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 64.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

heteronormativity, white supremacy, neurotypicality, and disablism, a defiance not limited to a lifestyle politics but also as a practice of organization, an episteme and a mythos, a material relation and an idealist possibility, a walking riot and a peripatetic dream.

Much of the extant body of work on the tramp falls into three dominant readings, often overlapping within the same text: the psycho-social diagnosis of the tramp as aberrant product of an incurable wanderlust,¹⁷⁵ the tramp as romantic myth of white male escape into the wilderness made up of a counterrevolutionary, revanchist, and parasitical class¹⁷⁶, and the tramp as a figure only adequately rendered by an empirically driven realism which diffuses the romantic shroud in order to understand the sheer desperation and hardship of such severe material deprivation.¹⁷⁷ Anytime a discussion of the tramp as actively political force

¹⁷⁵ Most prevalent within the early sociological narratives on tramping (Wyckoff, Flynt, Anderson), this view sees its apotheosis in Robert Park's assessment: "The trouble with the hobo mind is not the lack of experience, but lack of a vocation. The hobo is, to be sure, always on the move, but he has no destination, and naturally he never arrives. Wanderlust, which is the most elementary expression of the romantic temperament and the romantic interest in life, has assumed for him, as for so many others, the character of a vice. He has gained his freedom, but he has lost his direction. Locomotion and change of scene have had for him no ulterior significance. It is locomotion for its own sake. Restlessness and impulse to escape from the routine of ordinary life, which in the case of others frequently marks the beginning of some new enterprise, spends itself for him in movements that are expressive merely. The hobo seeks change solely for a habit, and, like the drug habit, moves in a vicious circle. The more he wanders, the more he must. It is merely putting the matter in another way to say that the trouble with the hobo, as Nels Anderson has pointed out in his recent volume, *The Hobo*, is that he is an individualist." Robert Park, "The Mind of the Hobo," in *Human Communities: The City and Human Ecology* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1952), 93.

¹⁷⁶ Todd DePastino's *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) best exemplifies this bent. Perhaps the most extensive contemporary historiographical compendium of texts on American tramping, DePastino sees in the predominance of white males among the tramping order and the failure of many radical groups to effectively organize the tramps *en masse* a place for whiteness to cathect in a desire to return to the democratic social order. He ignores Kenneth Kusmer's claims in *Down and Out on the Road: The Homeless in American History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) that "the hobo jungle was seemingly one of the most racially integrated institutions in America" (140) and that "new immigrants, the Chinese, and newly freed African Americans...were reputed to be the most generous in giving to the homeless" (87). Kusmer on the other hand fails to see the tramp as at all political, seeing in examples of this solidarity only a sympathetic solidarity (seeming to ignore that this alone would still be intensely political).

¹⁷⁷ This position, extending out from Marx's work on the development of vagrancy as a legal category developed during the ascendancy of a capitalist world-system which sought to stabilize a dependency on wage labor, is articulated in Mark Neocleous's reading of the origins of the policing function in *The*

arises, the bets are immediately hedged, and the anarchistic and communistic potentialities of this figure almost never considered beyond a quick dismissal or musing aside. With these lacunae in mind, we can look to the tramp as a harbinger of potentials to have been otherwise, to cut against the grain of a totalizing account and see within a cultural history of this figuration an itinerant node of a nebula, a commons in which radical epistemologies develop that have yet to be fully realized.

The Literary (Tramp) in (Tramping) Literature

In order to escape the brutal Chicago winter, many tramps took an alternative route to the diverged road of suicide or (suicide) bomber laid out by Parsons, instead becoming “some of the most persistent users” of the Chicago Public Library.¹⁷⁸ In his 1923 sociological monograph *The Hobo*, Nels Anderson presents his fieldwork findings of Chicago’s renowned Hobohemia. Anderson herein portrays the hobo as a figure preternaturally inclined towards the written word. This observation should not necessarily surprise. The downtime in a box car, the languid hours spent in the jungle, the waiting round (and round, and back again, *ad infinitum*) between the odd job and the next lend themselves well to reading since, when one is not able or not willing to sell their time, spending that temporal surplus becomes a

Fabrication of Social Order: A Critical Theory of Police Power (London: Pluto Press, 2000): “Where historically the vagrancy laws involved refusenik members of the forerunners of the proletariat being put to death at the hands of the state, in the eighteenth century an increasing number of crimes against property were treated in the same fashion: resistance to capital was met by capital punishment” (40). Additionally, Eric Shocket’s *Vanishing Moments: Class and American Literature* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006) and Gavin Jones’s *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) both fault an American literature which too often only handles class and poverty only as metaphor or as a substitute for racial logics, failing to fully grasp an economic materialism. Similarly, John Allen’s *Homelessness in American Literature: Romanticism, Realism, and Testimony* (New York: Routledge, 2004) asserts that “homelessness in literature has been either romanticized or objectified” as if this categorical bifurcation can ever be so neatly made (4).

¹⁷⁸ Nels Anderson, *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), 185.

necessity of sorts. That the hobo reads then should appear far less remarkable than

Anderson's brief description of *how* and *what* the hobo reads:

The homeless man is an extensive reader. This is especially true of the transients, the tramp, and the hobo. The tramp employs his leisure to read everything that comes his way. If he is walking along the railroad track, he picks up the papers that are thrown from the trains; he reads the cast-off magazines. If he is in the city, he hunts out some quiet corner where he may read. The tramp is a man with considerable leisure, but few books.¹⁷⁹

Anderson shows us here that the hobo is not simply any reader, but a voracious and obsessive one, a collector seeking out stray bits of print here and there, a library in motion, collating and disintegrating moment to moment, station to station. With “few books,” the tramp must seek out all available texts, refuse newspapers and out of date periodicals, in order to fill their waking hours. This voracity for print also punctuates the daily rhythms of the tramp as Anderson describes the desire for a “quiet corner” as a “hunt,” an atavistic drive for sustenance. If one of the most iconic visions of the tramp arises out of a quest for food, we find here an intellectual life of pleasure and learning sought with a parallel hunger, materially sufficed via a serendipitous discovery and a rummaging. Additionally, Anderson's tramp possesses a reading strategy reliant less on a discerning practice of selection than on a principle of endless accumulation, since the tramp will “read everything that comes his way.” This willingness to read everything available, to eschew the cloistered refinements of genre distinction as one more bourgeois luxury good, positions the tramp as a proto-postmodern reader, developing a taste for bricolage as a practical necessity.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Writing thirty-nine years after the initial publication of *The Hobo*, Anderson insists that the hobo “had a higher degree of mental curiosity and cosmopolitan interest than most workers” while insisting two paragraphs later that “few hoboes ever learned how to use leisure time.” This inability to recognize the

In addition to this orientation towards a reading with leisure (a reading praxis extending from, but in excess of, leisure reading), “the hobo who reads sooner or later tries his hand at writing.”¹⁸¹ The tramp’s writing appears here as diverse as the tramp’s reading, encompassing an array of genres and styles including letters, novels, essays, dramas, songs, poems, and journalism—evidence that the tramp will write everything as well. While acknowledging the tramp’s variety, Anderson does note a cohesion of interest circulating among these authors: “Most numerous of the hobo writers are the propagandists and dreamers. They are the chief contributors to the rebel press. Many of them care to be identified with no other. They are not artists nor do they write for gain. They have little patience for the writer who lives for the so-called ‘filthy-lucre.’”¹⁸² Propaganda and dreams mark the tramp’s primary literary endeavors. Held together this coupling signals the incitement to revolution and the possibilities its occurrence may open up; taken as separate endeavors, propagandizing and dreaming may mark a dialectical relation, a political participation reducible neither to platforms nor utopias, a writing of *Aufhebung* necessarily unique in each and every iteration, a provision of anonymity and fugitivity underwriting the desire “to be identified with no other” while writing within and without the nebula, rejecting both prior aesthetic values and (by extension) market value altogether and substituting it with a communistic value found in this cumulative movement (always *in motus*) of propaganda and dreams. As Jesse Cohn argues: “In liberation fiction, the narrative of

consistency of a pursuit, that the hobo’s literariness may in fact precisely be an exceptional use of leisure time, seems never to occur to Anderson. Ibid., xiv-xv.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 188.

¹⁸² Ibid., 190.

movement becomes one of the most potent figures for the movement of narrative itself.”¹⁸³

The impulse towards propaganda and dreams in the tramp’s writing invigorates the narrative of motion and the motion of narrative with the possibilities embedded in the riotocratic, a writing towards (as of yet unknown) futurities.

Anderson highlights another element of the tramp’s writing (albeit without identifying it)—a transient ephemerality. In attempting to note the sheer variety of tramp writing, we find in Anderson’s observations a profound sense of archival deterioration and loss, a writing of negation which like the tramp, remains fundamentally un-locatable in its locomotion:

Another man carried about a great roll of manuscript which purported to be a ‘society novel.’ It was entitled *The Literary in Literature*. It was written in lead pencil and represented the accumulated effort of several years. When the mood struck him, he added a chapter or a paragraph. Before the last page had been written, however, the first was so badly dimmed from being carried around that it could not be deciphered.¹⁸⁴

The Literary in Literature announces itself boldly, promising to identify some internal principle which has not been adequately deduced prior, an offer on behalf of an uncovering and unmasking. Anderson’s scare quotes alert his reader to the preposterousness of this manuscript’s declared genre, a skepticism aimed more at the author than *The Literary in Literature* itself, as he surely doubts that this tramp intimately knows the subtle proprieties of the drawing room and the board room, the club and the ball. What if, however, what is so literary in literature is precisely that which a society novel has sought to expunge? Might *The Literary in Literature* identify a *socius* derived not from the relations of capital but rather the

¹⁸³ Jesse Cohn, *Underground Passages: Anarchist Resistance Culture 1848-2011* (Oakland: AK Press, 2014), 180.

¹⁸⁴ Anderson, 189.

comradeship and mutual aid developed in the hobo jungle? Having only the title and genre before us denies us the possibility of knowing what this unnamed author has determined to be the literary, but we can still see something of this novel in its vanishing act. Unlike Kerouac's single manuscript scroll typewritten decidedly off the road, *The Literary in Literature* bears the trace of its having been (un)written on the road, a demonstration that "the necessity of passage through a crossed-out determination, the necessity of that *turn/trick [tour] of writing* is irreducible."¹⁸⁵ This tour of writing is a tour of the author's own motion, one which has over the years obscured and rubbed away the past, made a beginning illegible, and instead brought around a writing still to come, a scroll extending forward with a plot made increasingly oblique, a homeless narrative further removed from origination, with each added chapter or paragraph, an earlier one disappearing. *The Literary in Literature* hails liminality as the literary, ushering in each instance of the new only by changing the past, remaking context, drifting into undecipherability and embracing an obscurantism that will make this novel formally unpublishable, unreadable, and imminently rewritable. In another of Anderson's subjects, he observes a similar impulse towards a disappearing writing: "Another man spends most of his leisure on the north side of Hobohemia, writing fantastic paragraphs. They are interesting and amusing. He does not try to publish them. He writes them because he enjoys it."¹⁸⁶ These "fantastic paragraphs" derived from a free time that is a stolen time do not possess the sublime transience of transit on display in *The Literary in Literature*, instead embracing the leisure based in work's absence that allows this tramp to halt

¹⁸⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 25.

¹⁸⁶ Anderson, 189-90.

and linger. These paragraphs do not erase themselves but rather become tucked away upon composition, a writing bereft of circulation and a celebration of its stillness and repose, a writing which at its conclusion performs its particularly “fantastic” nature, eluding us and denying our access even as Anderson’s glimpse of it tantalizes his reader with the possibility in a prose that refuses to be read, that trick of writing.

In his study of the dime novel, *Mechanic Accents*, Michael Denning considers the figure of the tramp as one which at its inception attempted to identify and characterize a particular historical development: “[The tramp] was a category constructed in the wake of the 1873 depression and the 1877 railroad strikes to designate migratory and unemployed workers; indeed it was ideological naming of the phenomenon of unemployment.”¹⁸⁷ A categorical signifier of an historical condition, the tramp appears as a means of making sense of a generalizable condition by ascribing to it and encoding it with particular meanings. Denning points to the dime novel as “an arena of this ideological struggle over the tramp,” a site in which meaning could be (un)made and contested, a popular literature through which a certain radical current may run, a place where mass unemployment and discontent may well transform into upheaval with a single spark.¹⁸⁸ An 1878 dime novel (one which Denning does not discuss) opens up just such possibilities in its attempt to characterize and give form to this nascent figure of the tramp. *The Tramp: His Tricks, Tallies and Tell-Tales with All His Signs, Countersigns, Grips, Pass-Words and Villanies Exposed* written “by an ex-tramp,” edited by Frank Bellew with illustrations by Frank Bellew, A Bee, and Chip, imagines a tramp milieu

¹⁸⁷ Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987), 149.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

obsessively plotting revolution in the shadows, “looking forward with longing eyes to some grand national smash-up.”¹⁸⁹ Narrated from the vantage of an out of work journeyman printer (also a former schoolteacher and newspaper sub-editor) who through “much rum and many misfortunes” found himself “a ragged, dirty, unwholesome Tramp,” the novel oscillates between a kind of fantastical ethnographic rendering of a fugitive society rarely glimpsed by anyone not of this slum proletariat and a romantic comedy in which the plucky protagonist attempts to once again enter into a respectable society through his courtship of a farmer’s daughter.¹⁹⁰ His entry into the world of tramping begins during the lean winter whereupon he has sought refuge amid the city’s world of “tatterdemalion vagabonds like myself, who formed a syndicate, sharing their, beggings, and findings, and stealings, together.”¹⁹¹ The reader’s first look at tramp life shows it as fundamentally communally oriented, a place wherein a very recently unemployed tradesman can instantaneously enter into a collective of other individuals he can recognize as like himself. While this syndicate receives no other description, its brief appearance harkens towards a system of mutual aid in which all that labor which receives no wage (the days spent begging, finding, and stealing) manifests in a communistic distribution system. This sharing becomes possible only as this syndicate recognizes itself as such, tatteredness and raggedness as the condition of belonging, the movement in which lumpenness has become legible as something else, as a lumpenproletariat. If, as Marx’s son-in-law Paul Lafargue argued (two years after the publication of *The Tramp*...) “all [the proletariat’s] individual and social woes are born of its

¹⁸⁹ Frank Bellew, *The Tramp: His Tricks Tallies and Tell-Tales with All His Signs, Countersigns, Grips, Pass-Words and Villanies Exposed* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald Publishers, 1878), 23.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

passion for work,” this syndicate, this collective, this class, has modified the proletariat and its passion (another genealogy of Marxism, one that has been morphed and amended in its own modification of its familial relation to Marx himself, a branching rather than a breaking).¹⁹² Here, we see no demand issued forth by the syndicate for a right to work, but something closer to what Lafargue calls the right to be lazy, a right with the corollary that “work ought to be forbidden and not imposed.”¹⁹³ A right to be lazy, a right to laze actively, is after all the practice that allowed this tramp to enter into this syndicate: “First when dull times came, I was thrown out of work; then I loafed, and drank, and looked for something to do; then I got a job, and then I was out of it; then more loafing, then a little work; then more rum and more loafing, until finally I became a tramp.”¹⁹⁴ The narrator only becomes a tramp when loafing increases in inverse proportion to working. Since laziness holds this iteration of a lumpenproletariat together, its status in Lafargue’s formulation as “the mother of the arts and noble virtues” demonstrates the tatterdemalions as particularly inclined towards creation; this radical *poiesis* posits the daring and doing as that begging, finding, and stealing in common, in a communism that redistributes, revalues, and restages the drama of everyday life.¹⁹⁵

After the narrator has left the city (having first found time for some picaresque courtship antics with a rural farmer’s daughter), he sets off further into the desolate woodlands of the countryside so as to remove himself from the conglomerate of tramps the reader may be accustomed to and enter into the hidden and fugitive realm, the space that

¹⁹² Paul Lafargue, *The Right to Be Lazy: Essays by Paul Lafargue* (Oakland: AK Press, 2011), 25.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁹⁴ Bellew, *The Tramp*, 5.

¹⁹⁵ Lafargue, *The Right to be Lazy*, 51.

requires firsthand knowledge that this little dime novel's title has promised to reveal. His entry into this world occurs via another moment of recognition. A man cooking dinner with his wife and daughter by the roadside sees the narrator and his companion, "recognizing in us brothers in misfortune" and extending an invitation to join him on his journey "for the central camp of the Tramps in Sullivan County."¹⁹⁶ Upon entering this Edenic enclave, the narrator remarks that it "made an admirable retreat for men of our class" and finds himself instantly hailed as "comrade."¹⁹⁷ At this moment, we observe what an orthodox workerism would hold as an impossibility—these tramps have been interpellated within a category of class, held together by a sense of something inextricably shared in common. This rural Sullivan County retreat signals an entry point into a spatial utopian enclave; however, unlike the utopias which "overleap the moment of revolution itself and posit a radically different 'post-revolutionary' society,"¹⁹⁸ this utopia draws on "the commitment of the anarchists to the freedoms of the everyday and a life beyond centralization, power, and dependency"¹⁹⁹ in order to sketch the utopian function as still unfolding, as yet unfinished and necessarily tethered to a moment in which it will grow outward and continually develop, a malleability necessitated by the horizon line demarcated by revolution as such.

While this order of tramps practices absurdist initiation oaths which harken to the paranoia surrounding the concept of the secret society as such, the hidden knowledges offered to the narrator upon his membership suggest a rather concrete reason for paranoia,

¹⁹⁶ Bellew, *The Tramp*, 13.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁹⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007), 16.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

one beyond simply the rehashing of anti-Masonic propaganda. This gang, “The Ragged Red Rovers,” shares with the narrator their secret hieroglyphics (displayed for the reader so as to alert them to vigilance of this new sign system), their democratic executive and juridical structure, and the maps kept displaying a detailed report of every home in the nearby wilderness demarcating who makes an ally, an enemy, or an easy mark. The Ragged Red Rovers have preempted the sociologist who will come to obsess about the tramp in subsequent decades. They have been studying and mapping the working world, developing an index of data for reference. But this gang is only one cell of a larger force with a much larger plan of action:

He was in correspondence with a grand central lodge somewhere out West: but the name of the place I could never ascertain, for that secret was guarded with jealous care. I learned, however, that the Tramp organization was something immense, and that their organization is political and revolutionary. They have nothing in common with the Socialists, whose chief object is to organize and stimulate labor, and who are bitterly opposed to all loafers, tramping or stationary; but the Tramp’s object is, when any trouble takes place, to aid the revolutionary party, strikers or what not, and reap a large harvest of plunder.²⁰⁰

Amidst a narrative explicitly promising to reveal, this description only opens the door a crack, leaving the full description of the plot to coalesce within the reader’s imagination, a nebulous revolution forming around the country, plotted somewhere “out West” in a space symbolically weighted enough in the American mythos to harbor this conjoined threat of anonymity, regeneration, and rewriting. This unveiling of the tramp’s world as “something immense...political and revolutionary” ominously drapes over this entire novel a future unresolved. Even as the narrator will eventually steal a rich man’s clothes to return to the farmer’s daughter he loves, “the glorious pictures of riot and anarchy, painted in the rudest

²⁰⁰ Bellew, *The Tramp*, 20.

of rude word-colors” (linguistic paintings surely deeply hued in the red and the black) will remain a threat to bourgeois comfort.²⁰¹ This lumpenproletariat will back “the revolutionary party” even as its endgame remains markedly different. These guerilla cells preparing for wide scale revolution alongside laboring proletarians (albeit with the former’s goal to pick through the rags of wealth scattered by the latter’s toppling of the national politico-economic power structure) characterizes this tramping organization as a mobile riot in waiting, already so coordinated as to usher in their own dreams of a regime of laziness at any given moment. This novel astutely differentiates the goals of organizing and stimulating labor from those which would build another world wherein laboring itself has taken a back seat to loafing. These tramps seek free time and wish to obtain it via the theft of wealth, an outgrowth of a communalism already present in the campsite. With “numerous disguises and make ups” and “various implements useful in picking and stealing,” The Red Rover Gang has developed a technics for the insurrection and appear ready to strike and disappear, the raids on the chicken coop held in an analogical relation of the raids to come on capital itself, that grand national smash-up.²⁰²

When the narrator must return to the fold of respectability (a must, for how else could he then bring warning to the readers of the imminent danger posed by this infinitely mobile army in waiting), the novel drastically oscillates in its sympathies, drifting between justification of these tramps while desperately yearning to land on a formulation that could adequately condemn them, building up a moral high ground only for it to keep collapsing in on itself. He notes that “all mortals who are suffering and without power are hated by their

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

fellow creatures” before arriving at a succinct summation of his life without wages: “I had rebelled against this hoggish insolence of the prosperous, and wrested by cunning and force what they had denied to me on fair terms—a living.”²⁰³ A living denied and thus a living taken, this logic does not simply fall back on a defense of a last resort; rather, it appears to celebrate the ability to *take* a living if one has not been allowed to make it in the arena of employment, “the cunning and force” required of the tramp marks a power that “the prosperous” have overlooked. We must quickly note the development of character through adversity, however, as he claims that “society could not exist on such a principle” and thus our narrator reasons that he will become a reformer rather than a revolutionary, “striv[ing] rather to aid other poor suffers like myself who were floundering about in the mire of beggary and trampery, rather than revenge myself on the heartless mass of prosperous humanity.”²⁰⁴ This argument turns on “society” and with this in mind, the narrator’s assessment holds as a social order based in the exploitative creation of surplus value cannot hold when a rebellious lumpen grouping commits to stealing back wealth in turn. But the implication here that “beggary and trampery” cannot exist as the grounds from which a newly conceived and oriented *socius* can grow appears contrary to the narrator’s own subsequent revelation. Reminiscing about cathecting to a desire of watching “the city burning, and the rich rushing from their homes and poor and helpless as myself, and revel in the spectacle,” he again resolves to repress this vision and “cultivate a more rational and humane spirit” in its place.²⁰⁵ Yet even this collapses, since “then it occurred to me that I was

²⁰³ Ibid., 31

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

at that instant wearing stolen clothes and jewelry.”²⁰⁶ The entire new life this former tramp has now built for himself (set to inherit the yeoman farm and live a life of puritanical domestic bliss) has been predicated on this robbery. Proudhon’s dictum that property is theft echoes the narrator’s moment of self-awareness, a textual glimpse of a moment in which the dialectic has finally begun to turn, (m/t)aking a living becoming inseparably linked and impossibly similar. The ending of a traditional romance plot, a coupling and a happily ever after, has been reinterpreted into the mode of economic realism, where no wealth can have been ethically acquired and the tramp organization remains lurking on the outskirts of town, a problem unresolved, waiting not to light out for the territories but for the signal from them, when that grand central lodge somewhere out West feels the time is right for those glorious pictures of riot and anarchy.

Playing the Tramp

While the dime novel tramp remains rooted to a romantic tradition, the following decades saw an increased attempt to capture tramping within the confines of documentarian realism. The exposition of an aesthetics of tramping as rooted in mimetic materialism has its most poignant and pointed analysis in the early goings of Jack London’s 1907 memoir of itinerancy *The Road*. In this text, London, “the most widely read novelists among the ‘bos,’” chronicles his brief time spent tramping during the 1890s, including tales of a thirty day spot in the pen for vagrancy and a brief foray with the Western contingent of Coxe’s Army led by Charles Kelly.²⁰⁷ The opening chapter, “Confession,” takes the form of an apologia

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Anderson, *The Hobo*, 187.

(without apology), attempting to justify a gift received under false pretenses, which is to say, a kind of theft:

There is a woman in the state of Nevada to whom I once lied continuously, consistently, and shamelessly, for the matter of a couple of hours. I don't want to apologize to her. Far be it from me. But I do want to explain. Unfortunately, I do not know her name, much less her present address. If her eyes should chance upon these lines, I hope she will write to me.²⁰⁸

London claims these lies have been necessitated by circumstance. He had spent the day at the track, now penniless and hungry in a town with a police department cracking down on vagrants. Set on obtaining a meal before hopping a train out of town, he briefly contemplates turning to “the very poor” who “constitute the last sure recourse of the hungry tramp” as “they can always be depended upon.”²⁰⁹ This evocation of a solidarity preternaturally found among “the very poor” cuts two ways: it signals a prefigurative formulation of mutual aid as tradition already ongoing and in place, and it simultaneously places London (and the figure of the tramp more generally) as somehow just outside of this extension of association, desirous to obtain from those who have surplus rather than those already willing to share. Instead of utilizing the community found in this lowest rung of poverty, London opts to con the middle class Nevada woman to whom he will not apologize, this chapter an attempt “to explain” the politics of this wealth reappropriation.²¹⁰

This brief moment demonstrates the tramp as able to discern between proletarian and petty

²⁰⁸ Jack London, *The Road* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 16.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.; “Perhaps in old age, the Reno woman...entertained fond memories of the begging boys who sometimes told stories in her kitchen. Perhaps she fed them still, joining the venerable crowd of listeners and readers willing to find truth in tales told by the most marginal members of society. Perhaps she resented their impositions. Perhaps she relished their inventions. Perhaps she knew that tellers of plain unvarnished tales sometimes used their stories not only to alter their own lives but to change the world.” Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 175.

bourgeois, a distinction crucial to deterring the stigma of lumpenness as a leech on labor, an integral nuance that even the part time tramp London seems to make with relative ease.

London sees this knack for critical detail as a fundamental portion of the tramp's more primary social function—being an artist. Similar to Robert Park's assessment that "the hobo is the bohemian in the ranks of common labor" for the hobo "has the artistic temperament,"²¹¹ London positions the moment of begging as a theatrical performance, one that must recall that drama of everyday life in the mode of profound tragedy at the drop of a hat, a frenzied moment of improvisation "as in a lighting flash."²¹² His assessment of begging as theatre sketches the outlines of something like a tramp's poetics, an aesthetic manifesto in brief:

The successful hobo must be an artist. He must create spontaneously and instantaneously—and not upon a theme selected from the plenitude of his own imagination, but upon the theme he reads in the face of the person who opens the door, be it man, woman, or child, sweet or crabbed, generous or miserly, good-natured or cantankerous, Jew or Gentile, black or white, race-predjudiced or brotherly, provincial or universal, or whatever else it may be. I have often thought that to this training of my tramp days is due much of my success as a story-writer. In order to get the food whereby I lived, I was compelled to tell tales that rang true. At the back door, out of inexorable necessity, is developed the convincingness and sincerity laid down by all authorities on the art of the short-story. Also, I quite believe it was my tramp-apprenticeship that made a realist out of me. Realism constitutes the only goods one can exchange at the kitchen door for grub.²¹³

London intriguingly argues for the story to be tailored to the individual recipient, a writing for the reader's own particular affective attachment, relational knowledges, and ideological orientations in order to adequately render it effective. Yet this creation can only begin on the foundation laid by the begging author's initial reading, a text born out of a split second

²¹¹ Park, "The Mind of the Hobo," 95.

²¹² London, *The Road*, 22.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

interpretation of the domestic host's visage, a rewriting of the physiognomic discourse which sought to identify criminality in a facial reading. Herein, the criminal (vagabondage too being but another juridical category and criminologist's type) must discover something aberrant in the homeowner, a characteristic in excess of the ordinary which will help to ensure the tale's success. The tramp's poetics have a rather immediate litmus test for their creation since the felicity conditions of a text's working reception either results in rendering "inexorable necessity" temporarily quieted or leaving the author to try their hand at producing another piece for another audience. London's contention that this practice is a kind of trial by fire for the craft of realist story-telling characterizes the genre as a commodity good, reducing the story itself to a simple market value, details accumulate like pocket change, adding up to the great exchange, the recompense of the meal (or the check from the publisher). His realism, functionalist and utilitarian, figures the tramp as unidimensional and monomaniacal, creating only when the need strikes. His reminiscence on tramping casts authenticity primarily on hardship and struggle, while failing to recognize those moments in which improvisation crafts the fantastical, drawing on the romance and the myth, seeing a story's "convincingness and sincerity" as the only merits worth lingering within. Trying desperately to convince the reader of *The Road* that he has in fact been at one time a tramp, if only briefly, London seems to lose track of the literary in literature altogether.

Josiah Flynt Willard, sociologist and part time undercover tramp, is also the addressee of the epigraph to *The Road*, in which London refers to him as "The Real Thing, Blowed in the Glass."²¹⁴ Willard, so attached to the tramp life he had occasion to repeatedly

²¹⁴ Ibid., 7.

take to the road even when his output on the subject had become redundant, could hardly be less of “the real thing,” although London’s adulation certainly aligns with his conception of tramping as realist endeavor, finding a marker of authenticity in a man quietly addicted to taking to the road who justifies it under the guise of policing. In his 1900 work, *Notes of an Itinerant Policeman*, he even gets a badge from a railroad police force to go on the beat to produce a study of the criminal mind (but of course he ends up writing a book largely resembling his 1899 *Tramping with Tramps*, obsessively unable to leave the tramp for too long). While Flynt’s unresolved coupling of condescension and longing for tramp life mar much of his work, his observations of the tramp’s literary and political tendencies merit attention. His discussion of the tramp’s reading and political culture appears startlingly similar to Anderson’s work two decades later. He claims that “in a superficial way tramps read practically everything they can get a hold of,”²¹⁵ “the library in Cooper Union...is one of their favourite gathering-places in New York City during the cold months, and I have seen tramps reading there day after day,” and “it would surprise a great many people to see the kinds of novels many of them choose” being prodigious readers of Thackeray, Dickens, Hugo, and Sue.²¹⁶ Although we once again see an emphasis on the tramp’s desire to read “everything,” the novelists Flynt highlights indicate a confluence between the revolutionary undercurrents of exploitations exposed and the salacious expositions of the city’s underworld. Flynt goes on to claim that “next to the exciting novel or tale of adventure, the tramp likes to read books which deal with historical and economic subjects” and that “any book...which ‘shows up’ what the tramps consider the unreasonable inequalities in our

²¹⁵ Josiah Flynt, *Notes of an Itinerant Policeman* (Boston: L.C. Page and Co., 1900), 210.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 213.

social conditions, appeals to them, and thoughts in regard to such matters filter through the various social strata and reach the tramp class more rapidly than the reader would think.”²¹⁷ In Flynt’s description, the tramp’s intellectual archive of novels and leftwing economics and historiography showcase the figure of the tramp as not only intellectually engaged but also deeply malcontented, not simply susceptible propaganda but interested in the further development and dissemination of these ideas amongst their peers, Flynt noting that political discussions during a hang out at a communal hobo jungle are a perpetual favorite of tramp sociality.²¹⁸ When he describes having “heard tramps discuss socialism...with quite as clear an insight into its weak points, and with as thorough an appreciation of its alluring promises, as will be found in any general gathering of people,” Flynt highlights a bucking of the doctrinaire, an ability of the tramp to see within socialism the limit factors and kernels of possibility therein contained, a vision of their own twofold exclusion from both the wage and the wage laborer centered dissent. He criticizes the tramp’s politics for finding hope in negation, believing them to relish the role of incendiary agitation during strikes: “The more damage the strikers achieve, the more he is pleased, because he believes...that it is only upon ruins that the government he desires can be founded. When a train of cars is derailed or burned, he considers the achievement a contribution to the general downfall of the rich and

²¹⁷ Ibid., 217.

²¹⁸ “They are much more entertaining when discussing a book dealing with some serious question than when trying to state their opinion of a novel. If a character in a novel has taken hold of them, they can criticise it intelligently and amusingly, and they have their favourite characters in fiction just as other people have, but only a few tramps read novels with the intention of remembering their contents for any length of time; such books are taken up mainly for momentary entertainment, and are then forgotten. Books of historical or political import, on the contrary, are frequently read over and over again, and are made to do service as authorities on grave questions discussed at ‘hang-out’ conferences.” Ibid., 217.

favoured classes.”²¹⁹ Flynt sees the tramp as a wandering force, appearing in flashpoints of revolutionary struggle as a vanguard ready and willing to encourage the grand national smash up, begging only to get by until the daring and doing.

While London’s aesthetics of tramping revolve around realism, they do so because this is the genre he must employ to convince the reader (and perhaps more immediately, himself) that he was once a tramp; Flynt, on the other hand, in his desire to document the tramp as distinct from himself, opens up a moment for an alternate aesthetic category, finding in the improvisatory something much more collectively oriented than the creative mastery of the lone individual author anticipating his reader. Flynt’s notes on the art of begging display the tramp’s radical poiesis as embedded within a syndicalist enterprise of fugitive knowledges. Even as the tramp must shape their pieces to best fit their specific interlocutor, “there is a common fund of experience and fact by which he regulates his conduct in the majority of cases.”²²⁰ This “common fund” consists of a variety of individual scripts, orally handed down and shared with fellow compatriots and subsequently revised and updated:

It is the man who has memorized the greatest numbers of ‘gags’ or ‘ghost stories,’ as they are also called, and can handle them deftly as circumstances suggest, that is the most successful beggar. There are other requirements to be observed, but unless a man has a good stock of stories with which to ‘fool’ people, he cannot expect to gain a foothold among ‘the blowed in the glass stiff.’ He must also keep continually working over his stock. ‘Ghost stories’ are like bonnets; those that were fashionable and *comme il faut* last year are this year out of date, and they must be changed to suit new tastes and conditions, or be replaced by new ones. Frequently a fresh version of an old story has to be improvised on the spot, so to speak.²²¹

²¹⁹ Ibid., 204-5.

²²⁰ Ibid., 172.

²²¹ Ibid., 173.

The begging routine as outlined by Flynt looks like a genre exercise in which the spark of intellectual fancy amends and adapts a set-piece. Rather than making realists of them, the tramps utilizing these collectively workshopped texts refer to them as “ghost stories,” a category marked by convention’s continual reinvention, a speculative fiction which dwells upon the paranormal. While London points to the moment of excess which renders a story relatable, the ghost story’s excess lies precisely in its familiarity, its stock characters and settings, which then become remodeled in each subsequent instantiation, the subsequent successful effect arising from a climactic moment unforeseen in which the all too known takes on the quality of the spectral unknowability. These ghost stories which fall in and out of fashion require constant refreshing by a communal gathering of resources. The performative quality of these scripts in common is enhanced by Flynt’s contention that “the expert [beggar] has almost as many ‘changes’ as the actor,” suggesting that the entire tragedy of everyday life can be an elaborate ruse utilized to shift personas *ad infinitum*, the realism of the tramp lying in the unending malleability and opacity of genre’s singular origination point.²²² Flynt’s tramp reads like a participant in a Bakhtinian masquerade, a carnivalesque detouring of conventions, a threat to power never comprehended in full, evasive of totality as such. Perhaps this uncertainty surrounding the figure of the tramp explains Flynt’s inability to leave it behind and his desire to disguise himself as both tramp and detective. Unlike London who sees in tramp life its merely material, individualistic conditions, Flynt is aware of its interpersonal and communistic dynamics, its basis in dangerous dreams shared and dynamic roles taken up, identifying something like its dialectical condition that has

²²² Ibid., 186.

already moved simply by virtue of being observed, the tramp as electron, in declination, the full arc of motion immanently occupying a resistant path.

Organizing on the Bum

The most concerted effort to organize the migratory un(der)employed, to see in their mobility a tactical advantage to be leveraged against the state, came out of the International Workers of the World. While critics of the Wobblies pointed to “The Overalls Brigade” or the “Proletarian Rabble and Bummers” as signs of an anarcho-syndicalism incompatible with trade unionism, an overextension into the lumpenproletariat, the I.W.W. saw opportunity in the big tent of one big union, the tramp always already radicalized in a stance of opposition.²²³ The Wobblies organized around the nebula, the tramp alongside of black, indigenous, Latin(x), and immigrant laborers, attempting to compose a riotocratic ensemble, a grouping which Italian autonomist Eric Alliez claims recognized “that the margins are at the center: at the center of the assigning of value, at the center of socialized production.”²²⁴ Alliez’s brief piece “Hegel and the Wobblies” sees in these fin-de-siècle attempts by the I.W.W. to organize around itinerancy, a vision of futurity in which “the Wobbly figure re-emerges in the form of the fragmented worker.”²²⁵ Alliez finds a Hegelian reading simply unable to recognize “the lack of territoriality (of Power and of the insubordinate class is not equivalent to the territoriality of the Individual, the State, Politics, and the Political Party.”²²⁶ Instead, turning to the hobo, the now fragmented worker, the piecemeal employee, the

²²³ Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall All be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), 140.

²²⁴ Eric Alliez, “Hegel and the Wobblies,” in *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi (New York: Semiotext(e), 2007), 118.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid.

rotating part-time shift, these targets of an earlier organizing by the I.W.W., allows for mobility and its corollary resistance in aphiphony to compose a heterogeneous alliance of diverse historical figures and forces that allows for a model of anarchic refusal to foment in opposition to the rigid confines of place based sites of exploitation:

The Hegelian categories of dialectics cannot deal with the reality of a social organization of labor, the disappearance of the laboring individual, nor the practices of a movement which refuses to be reduced to the territorialization of a party or program. It is true that the American rebellions have never produced a form of consciousness of social reality as all-encompassing as the Hegelian-Marxist dialectics, nor a form of political planning as all-encompassing as the insurrection to conquer Power. A weakness of the American movement, as is explained by traditional Marxism, which in fact disregards the history of this unorthodox movement; or is it rather that a real society in movement cannot be reduced to the formal schemes of an all-encompassing design?²²⁷

Alliez identifies the limits of a Marxism organized solely around production. Instead, the Wobblies offer an alternative which recognized “a real society in movement,” an organization of transit in transition, an attempt to shrug off a totality which collapses difference into the dictates of Party and Program. However, Alliez’s contention that “America’s working class can only function as a driving belt between the State and the ranks of unproductive workers who are always aided, insured, and become, paradoxically, parasites,” mistakes a crucial mistake, assuming that the non-productive worker is not a both/and, “as extremists, drug addicts, marginals, and degenerates” and as an essential workforce.²²⁸ The extremists, drug addicts, marginal, and degenerates maintain these particulars amidst their general condition as a lumpenproletariat held in common nebulously, having been autonomous in their resistances, and the Wobbly embrace of the tramp as this

²²⁷ Ibid., 119.

²²⁸ Ibid.

articulated combination of a both/and utilized their ostracization from work as a jumping off point for a grouping which embraces this condition, following the road away from wage labor towards what Alliez calls “making intelligence autonomous as a productive force.”²²⁹

While the heyday of the I.W.W. has left behind a much larger cultural footprint than many of its radical forebears, *The Little Red Songbook* contains perhaps the most iconic celebration of tramping. Sung to the tune of the 1860s gospel tune “Revive Us Again,” “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum” demonstrates a raucous celebration of work’s refusal. The rallying song of the Overalls Brigade on their way to the Fourth Convention of the I.W.W. in 1907, the moment that would mark a notably more anarchistic direction of the one big union’s future, and passed out on broadsides, this song carries in its oral transmissions a cultural history of collectivity, of a unity in vocalization, a boxcar harmony echoing forth from the hobo jungle.²³⁰ A rewriting of gospel more in line with a gospel which remembers that the last shall be first, “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum” finds its joy in a condition in common and its insistence that the scolding reformer and exploiting boss have no remedies to offer the un(der)employed:

O, why don’t you work
As other men do?
How in hell can I work
When there’s no work to do?

Chorus
Hallelujah, I’m a bum!
Hallelujah, bum again!
Hallelujah, give us a handout—
To revive us again

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ “Hallelujah: Revive Us Again” in *The Big Red Songbook*, ed. Archie Green, David Roediger, Franklin Rosemont, and Salvatore Salerno (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), 52-3.

O, why don't you save
All the money you earn?
If I did not eat,
I'd have money to burn!

O, I like my boss
He's a good friend of mine.
That's why I am starving
Out in the bread-line

I can't buy a job
For I ain't got the dough;
So I ride in a box-car,
For I'm a hobo.

Whenever I get
All the money I earn,
The boss will be broke,
And to work he must turn!²³¹

The song centers upon the beggar's sardonic demand for revivification, not the revival of divine spirituality but the simple necessity of obtaining a daily bread denied. The questions posed to the tramp in the first two verse stanzas (those surely heard time and again requests for information and affective labor from a tramp, always called upon in harshly moralizing tones to explicate how they got there, what they intend to do about it, etc.) have easy, material answers that seem to evade the questioners, a kind of empirical breakdown when those who have come to be face to face with a starving petitioner of the have-nots. The situation arising in which "there's no work to do" does not lament this lack, only that the result requisites begging as a stopgap solution. As the fourth verse alerts us, even the job itself, if available and if desirably, still requires an initial investment of money for its obtainment. Thus, we arrive at the final verse, one which does not explicate or jest, but

²³¹ Ibid., 54.

instead threatens. It holds the utopian dream of reversal, when apportionment for labor will remain in the laborer's pocket, not as wages but as an appropriate symbolic relation to value produced, and in this scenario, the boss will then receive the most appropriate punishment the tramp can think of—work.

Published in *The Century Magazine* in June 1925, the short story “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum” by the bohemian radical Floyd Dell, narrates Jasper Weed’s trajectory from discontented runaway youth to tramp to Wobbly radical to radical aesthete. After he has joined the I.W.W., Weed wonders “where else but in the ‘Wobbly’ halls could he hear talk that was not the talk of money and the things money will buy?”²³² The embrace of the raggedness and tatteredness of lumpenness leads to ruminations of that which is precisely not oriented towards the commodity or crude materialism. However, the jingle of happily begging, of playfully demanding a handout for a meal, has crudely material limits. Eventually the tramp must begin to talk about money and the things money will buy. One can only starve so long. One can only ask for a holdover so many times. Eventually the performative utterance of request must become supplemented by the performative silence of a fugitive act, of a taking in the place of an asking.

The Epistemology of the Thief

Writing in the December 11, 1915 issue of *Regeneración*, Ricardo Flores Magón’s brief parable “The Beggar and the Thief” offers a necessary rejoinder to the satirically bent solidarity song, a coupling which reminds us that along with printing songbooks, the I.W.W. printed odes to machine-breaking direct action like Elizabeth Gurley Flynn’s *Sabotage*. This

²³² Floyd Dell, “Hallelujah I’m a Bum,” *The Century Magazine*, June 1925, 140.

pairing of the I.W.W. and Magon's *Regeneración* (the paper associated with the radical wing of the *Partido Liberal Mexicano*) recalls the historical moment in 1910 when "in northern Mexico, for the first time in history, revolutionary troops led by anarchists gained control of an expanse of territory where they planned to build a libertarian communist society from which they hoped to spread revolution globally...[in which] several hundred foreign anarchists and IWW members joined the PLM's forces in this endeavor."²³³ Magón imagines an encounter between a hungry beggar whose repeated requests of "Alms for the poor, for the love of God!" anger a thief who "scowls contemptuously" at the supplications.²³⁴ The beggar's primary retort to the thief stems from his claim to "respect the law"; he does not "have to evade the policeman's gaze" and "the rich see [him] with benevolence."²³⁵ The beggar does not disrupt power. The alms given him have been yoked from the meager benefaction of the class responsible for his plight. The thief's condemnatory harangue of the beggar reveals an anger at the lack of active disturbance, at the beggar's belief that somehow being a "good citizen" exculpates the passivity of the request for pittance:

I don't know if I'm honorable or not; but I know that I don't have the courage to ask the rich to give me a crumb, for the love of God, from what they've taken from me. Do I violate the law? Certainly. But the law is very different from justice. I violate the laws written by the rich, and this violation is itself an act of justice, because the law authorizes the robbery of the poor by the rich, that is, it authorizes an injustice; and when I snatch from the rich part of what they've stolen from the poor, I commit an act of justice. The rich pat you back because of your servility, your abject lowliness, that you guarantee their peaceful enjoyment of what they've stolen from you, me, and all the poor people of the entire world. The ideal state for the rich is that all of the poor have the soul of a beggar.²³⁶

²³³ Kenyon Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 124.

²³⁴ Ricardo Flores Magón, "The Beggar and the Thief," in *Dreams of Freedom: A Ricardo Flores Magón Reader* ed. Chaz Bufe and Mitchell Cowen Verter (Oakland: AK Press, 2005), 314.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 315.

The thief's accusation that the beggar acts as a "guarantee" for the ongoing state of hierarchical exploitation condemns the beggar not as a parasitical member of the lumpenproletariat but rather as a member of the poor who continues to receive the bare minimum without finding affront, happy with the scraps. When the tramp sings "Whenever I get /All the money I earn," the thief hears the promise not of a future event but a tactics for achieving it in the now, a call to direct action to expropriate the expropriators while their backs are turned, while their homes are empty, while they sleep. The thief's simple reversal around the idea of justice has its greatest effect in the separation of law from morality, a complete eschewal of a politics oriented around the state that is in this formulation merely a vestige of capital's power. Though Magón's parable ignores the ways in which begging itself can operate as an active theft, the concluding indictment that the bourgeoisie would rather "all of the poor have the soul of a beggar" demonstrates an important differentiation between two different forms of begging: a begging that actually marks dependency and a begging that merely performs dependency. It is the soul of the beggar that proves problematic, an orientation of the former's authentic belief in a status quo which begets such poverty. The bum need see themselves thieves to enter into a revolutionary relation, to move into that nebula which evades the prying eyes of the wealthy.

The thief and the tramp finally meet in the nineteenth century figure of the yegg, the criminal hobo, the professional using the road as an opportunity for cover, for anonymity, for quick escape, and for kicks. It is the yegg, Red, who in Alexander Berkman's *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* displays his open queerness and anarchist sympathies which provides a shock to Berkman's glorification of the laborer as such, seeing in Red the kind of morally

cracked lumpen he cannot immediately understand with categorical clarity. Red describes his life as largely one measured in the short periods between various stints in the pen. He elucidates the difference between the bum and the yegg (or as Red would have it “yagg” since he “insist[s] on the a, sir, as grammatically more correct, since the peerless word has no etymologic consanguinity with hen fruit and should not be confounded by vulgar misspelling”): the bum “is a low-down city bloke, whose intellectual horizon...revolves around the back door, with a skinny hand-out as his center of gravity” while the y(e/a)gg “dares to be and do, all bulls notwithstanding...he lives, aye, he lives,--on the world of suckers.”²³⁷ Daring and doing regardless of the policing of private property, the yegg contends that “work is a disease” and “one must exercise the utmost care to avoid contagion.”²³⁸ In work’s refusal and avoidance, the yegg finds an alternative sociality, one not solely built on a relation shared through the wage.

Jack Black’s bestselling 1926 memoir *You Can’t Win* recounts his time as a yegg, riding the rails across American and Canada during the 1880s up through the turn of the century, describing a life spent avoiding wage labor. He describes the “yegg brotherhood” as something almost mythical, an unknown order of highly organized and deftly skilled criminals: “[The yegg] is silent, secretive wary; forever traveling, always a night ‘worker.’ He shuns the bright lights, seldom straying far from his kind, never coming to the surface. Circulating through space with his always-ready automatic, the yegg rules the underworld of

²³⁷ Alexander Berkman, *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1999), 161.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

criminals.”²³⁹ The yegg takes advantage of the diurnal work rhythm for a nocturnal rhythm barely audible in its stealth, occupying fugitive space below “the surface,” “circulating” through paths left unmappable to the uninitiated. Black, however, does not actively involve himself in an explicitly political milieu, instead spending his time with other fugitives from the law, both inside and outside of the prison (a space wherein he takes counsel with other criminals in order to better learn how not to get caught the next time), nursing a morphine habit from jungle to jungle, all the while looking for the next score. Black’s life of crime is literally bookended, beginning and ending with literary encounters. He opens his memoir at the end:

I am now librarian of the San Francisco *Call*.
Do I look I look like one? I turn my chair so I can look in the mirror. I don’t see the face of a librarian. There is no smooth, high, white forehead. I do not see the calm, placid, composed countenance of the student. The forehead I see is high enough, but it is lined with furrows that look like knife scars. There are two vertical furrows between my eyes that make me appear to be wearing a continual scowl. My eyes are wide enough apart and not small, but they are hard, cold, calculating. They are blue, but of that shade of blue farthest removed from the violet.²⁴⁰

While London claims to read a face and make immediate sense of what kind of narrative corresponds with it, Black lingers in the knowledge of complexity and reversal, of harsh juxtapositions which appear not to fit together, his own countenance somehow atypical, the material not conforming to the ideal. By virtue of the constant need for deceit as a professional thief and con artist, Black seems aware of how his looks seem to give him away, an alert of a certain hiddenness, his eyes cataloguing more than the host of files at the paper. His first and final adoption of a wage laboring career, however, could not be better suited as

²³⁹ Jack Black, *You Can’t Win* (Port Townsend: Feral House, 2013), 21.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

he first entertains the idea of coming to criminality through the newspaper: “The James boys’ story ran on for days and I followed it word for word...When that story was over I turned to other crime stories and read nothing else in the papers. Burglaries, robberies, murders—I devoured them all, always in sympathy with the adventurous and chance-taking criminals.”²⁴¹ Black has been introduced into the romanticism of the outlaw not through the eccentric exaggerations of the dime novel but through the serialized narrative of the newspaper, of an ostensibly realist genre, the purportedly factual punctuality of the crime column. The “chance-taking,” the daring and doing, charms Black, an entryway into a world unlike the day to day ennui and protestant moralizing of his Midwestern childhood. During one of his many prison bids, Black once again discovers literature: “The prison had a splendid library, not a worthless book in it. All the best English authors were there and I went through them hungrily. I became so immersed in reading that I was careful not break the rules lest I lose three days or more from the books.”²⁴² The one time Black decides to straighten up and fly right, he does so lest he be separated from the printed word. During this personal renaissance, his circulation through the library mirrors his circulation through the underground, cultivating and refining a criminalized knowledge base. He studies metallurgy for counterfeiting, locksmithing for lockpicking, explosives for break-ins, sleeping habits for cat burglary, and poisons, herbs and drugs for his own narcotic habits. Everything Black reads morphs into his own epistemology, the epistemology of the thief, each item understood only to implement it for undermining the hierarchy that keeps the wealth locked away, knowing how its purported safety measures can be exploited and turned in against

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 211.

themselves. Black explains the development of this thief's epistemology as resulting solely from a sociality developed within the nebula, the lessons of the riotocratic:

From the day I left my father my lines had been cast, or I cast them myself, among crooked people. I had not spent one hour in the company of an honest person. I had lived in an atmosphere of larceny, theft, crime. I thought in terms of theft. Houses were built to be burglarized, citizens were to be robbed, police to be avoided and hated, stool pigeons to be chastised, and thieves to be cultivated and protected. That was my code; the code of my companions. That was the atmosphere I breathed.²⁴³

Black revels in turning the perceived order of things on its heads, a detouring of the commoditization process, a looking that sees in the commodity only an exchange value measurable by the fence, viewing use value only in so far as an object lends a hand of the ready-to-hand to the eventual heist to come. Describing this learning in the terms of the gaseous, the atmospheric, Black portrays the nebular as something necessarily shared within community, the criminal commune. He expounds on this mutual aid during a tramp convention at the jungle, highlighting the generosity of the disabled beggar: "The underworld beggars of this type are the most reliable and trustworthy, the most self-sacrificing and the quickest to help of any class of people outside the pale of society. Crippled, wounded thieves, fugitives and escaping prisoners, if they know what they are about, always turn to the beggars for aid and are never refused."²⁴⁴ The beggars split all their money, willing to set up anyone on the outside of respectable society with whatever assistance they have available. "The code" Black and his compatriots live by necessitates a communistic sharing of resources in which the theft from those *with* moves to those *without*, intervened by the moments of potlatch in which the wealth is set ablaze on sprees of booze

²⁴³ Ibid., 188-9.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 111.

and gambling. When Black describes his first theft he claims it felt “as if I had got even with somebody,” evoking a balance restored in the redistribution of petty property.²⁴⁵ While the “somebody” Black targets lacks a honed political incisiveness, the sociality fostered in the underworld often points towards bourgeois excess as its target, skirting around the more ideologically organized routes of the tramp as Wobbly; however, his text depicts a world wherein lumpenness holds together in vivid formations only to recede again on his circuitous journeys, briefly tethered by the excitement of eschewing work, evincing the same joy as those early newspaper accounts of banditry that drew Black into this world, the same accounts he would end up dutifully maintaining and organizing in the library, a seemingly innocuous collection with potential to become an archive of the underworld when encountered by the epistemological orientation of the underworld archivist.

Coda

If *You Can't Win* constructs a narrative of the underworld on the mainstem, outlining a densely interconnected nebula, it also provides a glimpse of the stages upon which these socialities developed: the hobo jungle, the bordello, the hop joint, the wino bar, the prison, the laundromat, the fence's house, the boarding room, to name a few. As George Caffentzis notes, the tramp collectively occupied and communalized a private property: “Through the complex organization of movement, information exchange and reproduction nodes, the hoboes created a nationwide network that used the private property of the railroad companies as their commons.”²⁴⁶ Black's novel focuses on precisely these spatial commons

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 76.

²⁴⁶ George Caffentzis, “The Future of ‘the Commons’: Neoliberalism's ‘Plan B’ or The Original Disaccumulation of Capital?,” *New Formations* vol. 69 (Winter: 2009): 35-6.

where we find the riotocratic developing, a host of characters continually passing through and leaving behind nothing but a trace of the possible, a marking onto place something like the material particular. In anarchist, sociologist, propagandist, and doctor Ben Reitman's 1910 paint on cloth chart diagram "Reitman's Social Geography," we glimpse something like the generalized ideal. Tim Cresswell describes the event at which Reitman presented on this composition:

On 17 November 1910 in the Pacific Hall on West Broadway, New York, Reitman orchestrated an event he called 'Outcast Night.' Anarchist intellectuals, who included Emma Goldman, witnessed a discussion featuring various types of social outcasts, among them hobos, prostitutes, 'homosexuals,' and criminals. The hall was crowded and the event had attracted the press. The audience were treated to a number of appearances by various 'outcasts,' from Hippolyte Havel, the Outcast Psychologist (speaking on why the outcast is the most important member of society), to Arthur Ballard, the Outcast Moralist (speaking on the religion of the outcast), and Sadakichi Hartman, the Outcast Poet (reading his unpublished sex drama, 'Mohammed'). At the end of the evening Reitman took the opportunity to reveal his 'social geography'—a talk based on a large map (entitled 'Reitman's Social Geography') of an imaginary peninsular and islands painted on a piece of canvas.²⁴⁷

While Cresswell's reading of this map crucially points to its reimagining of the burgeoning sociological field's often pathologizing diagrams and the ways in which Reitman has constructed a critical rendering of the multiple interlocking fields of power, he spends little time on the figuring of the outcast as not only subject to repression but also sharing an archipelago. The most stunning aspect of this mapping arises from Reitman's suggestion that the outcast as such consists of a number of islands separated from one another but all sharing an intriguingly close proximity: Prostitute Isle and Vagrant Isle (Hoboville, Bumtown, Beggar, Trampie) connect to Criminal Island, the Poverty Islands of Old Age, Orphans, Disable, Insane, Sick/Poor couched next to Race Prejudice Isle, the Ocean of

²⁴⁷ Tim Cresswell, *The Tramp in America* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 72.

Despair, Sea of Isolation, and Gulf of Doubt all separating these from Radical Island (Freethinkville, Freelovetown, Crankly, Anarchie, Tolstoy, Revolt), and over in the far corner of the map nearest to Radical Island float the yet unmapped and undefined land masses of Utopia and Freedom. The Ports (Jobless, Injustice, Direct Action) that ship off the outcasts from the Peninsular of Submerged Hope (walled out of the Land of Respectability by the Courts, Press, and Police) not only signal ways in which oppression manifests but also points of exchange, the sites by which the outcast can sail into so as to strike back at the mainland. The Outcast archipelago needs only to be connected, to recognize in their shared conditions and closeness an intimacy upon which they can collectively build, already able to plot and share in a space distinctly separate and diffuse, a ways away. Although Radical Island lies closest to those islands of a futurity to blossom, Utopia and Freedom remain inaccessible until travel in and among the outcast islands can be achieved, until this nebula can begin to make material routes within itself. In Reitman's portrait, Vagrant Isle is but a piece of a larger grouping, the tramp only a single actor among the larger (out)cast of this drama of everyday life. Just as Parsons depicted the proper end to a tramp's tragedy, one enacted here in an attack on Richville in the Land of Respectability, Reitman offers everyday dreams, the imaginary space wherein the figure of the tramp itself is already something else, holding a territory in common, awaiting it to be held by the solidarities of and within the outcast in the nascent linkages of a communism to come. In the next chapter, we will examine the ways in which the American novel at the *fin de siècle* crafted and populated its own unique set of social geographies, obsessively attempting to capture (as both portrayal and enclosure) the

nebulous figures operative on the outsides and undersides of accumulation, an (often failed) attempt to incorporate lumpenness within a representational schema of totality.

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Chapter III

“What Gountry Hass a Poor Man Got...?": The Fallen Idle of the American Novel at the
Fin de Siècle

Indicated in this light chatter about the dinner table there was an existence that was not at all what the youth had been taught to see. Theologians had for a long time told the poor man that riches did not bring happiness, and they had solemnly repeated this phrase until it had come to mean that misery was commensurate with dollars, that each wealthy man was inwardly a miserable wretch. And when a wail of despair or rage had come from the night of the slums they had stuffed this epigram down the throat of he who cried out and told him that he was a lucky fellow. They did this because they feared.

—Stephen Crane, “An Experiment in Luxury”

All day long, Mrs. Hooven and Hilda followed the streets, begging, begging. Here it was a nickel, there a dime, here a nickel again. But she was not expert in the art, nor did she know where to buy food the cheapest; and the entire day’s work resulted only in barely enough for two meals of bread, milk, and a wretchedly cooked stew. Tuesday night found the pair once more shelterless.

—Frank Norris, *The Octopus: A Story of California*

Hunger cannot help continually renewing itself. But if it increases uninterrupted, satisfied by no certain bread, then it suddenly changes. The body-ego then becomes rebellious, does not go out in search of food merely within the old framework. It seeks to change the situation which has caused its empty stomach, its hanging head. The No to the bad situation which exists, the Yes to the better life that hovers ahead, is incorporated by the deprived into *revolutionary interest*. This interest always begins with hunger, hunger transforms itself, having been taught, into an explosive force against the prison of deprivation. Thus the self seeks not only to preserve itself, it becomes explosive; self-preservation becomes self-extension. And this overthrows what stands in the way of the rising class, ultimately of the classless man. Out of economically enlightened hunger comes today the decision to abolish all conditions in which man is an oppressed and long-lost being.

--Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope, Vol. 1*

Responding to Ernst Bloch’s staunch defense of expressionism published in the pages of *Das Wort* in 1938, Georg Lukács’s “Realism in the Balance” attempts to position the realist genre as the mode best suited to the depiction of capitalism as a totality, claiming that “the slice of life shaped and depicted by the artist and re-experienced by the reader should reveal the relations between appearance and essence without the need for any external

commentary.”²⁴⁸ Lukács’s essay outlines a “Marxist theory of literature” as one necessitating an evaluative metric by which literature must strive to “grasp [objective] reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface.”²⁴⁹ Claiming that the realist’s “goal is to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society,” Lukács develops a theory of realism that hinges upon its mimetic ability to capture the contradictions undergirding capitalism via its scale of combination, a means of emphatically displaying how the vast interrelatedness of each of its parts is able to produce a synthetic whole in excess of mere summation.²⁵⁰ He claims that “the large-scale, enduring resonance of the great works of realism” arises due to “the infinite multitudes of doors through which entry is possible.”²⁵¹ This vision of realism as a genre especially capable of uncovering “the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society,” an elucidation fundamentally rooted in its vast capacity of “entry” points, suggests realism’s success in depicting the totality of the capitalist mode of production resides in its linkage between its unmasking of all those social relations warped by the value form and its mimetic scaling of capitalism as a world-system.

Yet, as Anna Kornbluh claims, it is precisely this interpretation which falls into a long tradition of misreading Lukács, positioning his theorizing “as advocating for a referential form of totality—literary realism as the mimesis of social diversity and document

²⁴⁸ Georg Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” in *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. ed. Ronald Taylor (London: NLB, 1977), 33-4.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

of class society” instead of more appropriately taking his theory of totality as a method, “the form of resonance between character, plot, imagery, temporality into an integrated system.”²⁵² If, as Kornbluh following Jameson has it, “to theorize in terms of totality is not to produce some suffocating enclosure of false unity but rather to chart the historical process of the capitalist mode of production’s foreclosure of other modes of production, and at the same time to resist that foreclosure by highlighting contradictions, by insisting on other possibilities, by complementing the chart of the past with hopes for the future,” then we can best understand Lukács’s advocacy of the realist novel’s Marxist possibilities as immanent within its particular theorizing within and from its formal structures.²⁵³ The positioning of totality as method, as the imbricated constructions of formal interplay, however, does not free us from the necessity of engaging with the mimetic content of the realist novel as the dialectical relationship between the two demands a critical investigation of *how* totality as method simultaneously creates a particular kind of representation, a crafting of meaning reliant upon this mutually constitutive relationship. An engagement with the ways in which the realist novel “grasp[s]” at the objective conditions of a living within capitalism must look both to the means of this containment and the principle of selection behind what is ultimately held within it.

American realism of the *fin de siècle*, however, displays another dialectical turn of Lukács’s theorization. These texts possess their own internal “deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships” that go to make up their interior worlds and mimetic processes, a portion of that “objective reality as it truly is” which continually

²⁵² Anna Kornbluh, “Totality,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 47, no. 3 (2019): 675.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 674-5.

escapes, slipping in and out of the text as an all too fine substrate, present only as so many disconnected parts which resist any attempts at symbolically overloading them, marking gaps within totality's formal mechanisms as they refuse to resound with the very ordering mechanisms of the genre. As Amy Kaplan argues in *The Social Construction of American Realism*: "The social world of each novel is constituted as much by those outside the immediate range of representation as by those at the center."²⁵⁴ It is exactly here, in this "outside" of "the immediate range of representation" that we find the nebula, the gaseous and dispersive register of social relations between those spectral revenants of the wageless haunting the (extra)territory of the fin de siècle novel. The nebula marks the absent presence of this literary epoch, appearing time and again as a trace of that which resists the synthetic inclusion of the written. Though Fredric Jameson argues that naturalism, as a subset of realism, "opens a space for the worker and along with him the more heterogenous population of the 'lower depths,' of lumpen proletarians and outcasts generally," I contend that the novels of this period (whether ostensibly cast as realist or as its naturalist extension) demonstrate the limits of this opening, a cut in the fabric by which we can observe the continual (re)emergence of nebulous figures into the text only to have the text attempt to foreclose and sew up the entryway into this very province.²⁵⁵

This chapter turns to texts by William Dean Howells, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser in order to demonstrate how the presence of nebulous figures outside the province of wage labor populate the margins of the realist and naturalist novel at the turn of the

²⁵⁴ Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 11.

²⁵⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), 148.

twentieth century even as the nebula, the social relations which allow these seeming isolatoes to be recognized as a contingent contingent, resists this formal representation. While these novels often attempt to portray the hazard of the wageless to the capitalist order only to later defuse them, this chapter claims that the riotocracy, the political modality of the nebula, continually threatens to spill over beyond this strategy of containment into an *active* presence. These communities of nebulous figures, minor characters evinced in small moments, remain unresolvable challenges to totality (both as representational mode and as formal method) and to the seeming stability of wage labor as a hegemonic form. When these brief flashpoints of a riotocracy, of a ragged excess, become illuminated as a shared characteristic of the genre at this particular moment in American literature, a simultaneous form becomes available, a reading of wage labor's absence as a utopian impulse lingering within the realist genre. Kaplan suggests that "realistic novels often share an impulse with their utopian counterparts to project into the narrative present a harmonic vision of community that can paradoxically put an end to social change," stoppages of the conflicts of capitalism that manifest as "utopian moments that imagine resolutions to contemporary social conflicts by reconstructing society as it might be."²⁵⁶ I agree that these texts do in fact imagine this phenomenon, but I argue that this more accurately can be read as capital's political unconscious, a dystopian world in which capitalist history and its incumbent contradictions can be resolved in the fantasy of a political economist's ideal. That is, I contend we can discern an inverse utopian image lingering within these texts. By orienting our interpretative hermeneutic to a critical reading of those nebulous figures populating the textual outside, we

²⁵⁶ Kaplan, *Social Construction*, 12.

can position them as the frame which come to set the terms of the novel's political interior. We can then begin to draft an outline of something like *The Social Construction of an American Lumpen-Realism*, an analysis of the embedded dreams of a condition of wagelessness animating a possible world that could be otherwise, one no longer centripetally organized around the gravitational center of wage labor, the emergent riotocracy carrying the utopian kernel capable of conceptualizing the impermanence of capitalist totality due necessarily to the inability of the purported totality reflected in the realist novel to capture and extinguish it.

“An Order of Classic Impostors Dear to Literature”

In William Dean Howells's 1896 collection *Impressions and Experiences* he includes two essays which attempt to collect his experience of obtaining impressions of New York's most impoverished inhabitants. The title of the work itself indicates a sensorial split, a distancing between what will be catalogued as having been indelibly marked by and as having been directly involved in, a tension of social observation and social participation that characterizes both Howells's liberalism and his literary output. The first of these essays, “An East-Side Ramble,” sees Howells in the mode of what he calls a once popular but now dying fad of making house calls upon the poor, even as these drop-ins signal more of a violent invasion of the bourgeois gaze than of a moment of communing. Prior to the narrative's venturing out into the tenements, Howells wryly notes that he observes “no signs of rebellion on the part of the poor” and that these impressions “left very little unknown to me, I fancy, of the

way the poor live, so frank and simple is their life.”²⁵⁷ These claims attempt to assuage any of his reader’s latent fear of a percolating revolutionary energy amongst the tenement dwellers, letting them immediately know that the mysteries of the city have now been definitively revealed, that no cabal of grand conspiracy remains hidden, that here we may find only the “frank and simple” characters of immiseration. While in the “Hebrew quarter,” Howells remarks that the poor “were uncomplaining, if not patient, in circumstances where I believe a single week’s sojourn, with no more hope of a better lot than they could have, would make anarchists of the best people in the city.”²⁵⁸ Howells’s contention that the dire hopelessness of poverty would induce the bourgeoisie to take up anarchism within a week cuts two ways: it marks a justification of sorts of anarchism, acknowledging its rootedness within an attempt to overthrow those mechanisms of capital which perpetuate this violent foreclosure of “hope of a better lot” and marks an entryway for liberalism, an attempt to suggest that the mechanisms of progressive reform must arrive from the top down as the disenfranchised here lack the fervor to redress the situation themselves through revolutionary practices (hence, the essay’s concluding call for public housing). Yet, elsewhere in his ramble, Howells has noted the Irishwoman who claimed “some good soul was the paying the rent for her” and whose tails of her husband’s indolence elicits a “small coin” of donation from Howells.²⁵⁹ Howells’s aside that “how her food came or the coal for her stove remained a mystery which we did not try to solve” implies the possibility that he has been conned, that this woman may have merely sensed the presence of an uncomfortable and sentimental

²⁵⁷ William Dean Howells, “An East-Side Ramble,” in *Impressions and Experiences* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1909), 96.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

mark.²⁶⁰ The “mystery” of this moment lies both in the possibility of mutual aid lingering behind the payment of this woman’s rent, that a community may be quietly pooling resources to prevent her dispossession and in the possibility of Howells being confronted with a narrative meant to extract recompense from his discomfiture with his proximity to the poor. Even amidst eviction, Howells claims that “the wretched neighbors gather about and take [the evicted] in, and their life begins again on the old terms,” a practice of mutual aid whose participants remain vague, the networks of solidarity drifting back into the nebula.²⁶¹ “An East Side Ramble” fails to see the riotocratic underpinnings of the practices hinted at herein, Howells unable or unwilling to recognize that his gaze only sees a highly limited performance of passivity, the strategic dissemblance of nebulous figures.

Contrastingly, Howells’s essay “Tribulations of a Cheerful Giver” focuses explicitly upon the limits of adequately taking account of lumpen beggars. In this piece he attempts to deconstruct the act of individual almsgiving, focusing upon the moral conflicts and social obligations the (un)charitable bourgeois have in their encounter with supplicant beggary. Howells strikingly characterizes these nebulous figures as necessarily unknowable in these brief encounters, emphasizing that no definitive certainty can be drawn as to whether the narrative of want provided is fictitious or not, as even a con most likely has roots in desperation. “Not able to think very ill even of impostors,”²⁶² he argues that the labor of begging itself must adequately be considered on material terms: “Beggary appears to me in its conditions almost harder than any other trade; and, from what I have seen of the amount

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 99.

²⁶² Howells, “Tribulations of a Cheerful Giver,” in *Impressions and Experiences* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1909), 134.

it earns, the return it makes is smaller than any other.”²⁶³ While much of the essay attends to those “tribulations” of Howells himself, ever vacillating upon the question of *how much* he feels personally bound to give (torn between the bad conscience of Christianity and political economy), the moments when Howells focuses upon the literariness of the lumpen story demonstrate his strained attempts at critically theorizing the relation between genre and begging. His own reading strategies become exposed as deficient in that he cannot see himself as the object of manipulation, the reader for whom the narrator attempts to extract recompense via the intertwining of the affective and the material, a pragmatics of storytelling. Howells initially makes a genre classification of begging narratives: “I must say that his statement of his own case is usually incoherent. The poor fellows have very little imagination or invention; they might almost as well be realistic novelists.”²⁶⁴ This sardonic slight of realism (one that runs counter to London’s insistence upon realism as the genre of practical necessity for a begging tale) appears to primarily highlight the mundanity of the tale, its fundamental plausibility, everydayness, and repetitiveness, yet of course immiseration under capital is precisely the realm of the (all too) plausible, everyday, and repetitive.²⁶⁵ Though Howells notes that “they seldom have any devices for working me, beyond the simple statement of their destitution,” he does not recognize that once he has given his small charitable donation, he has in fact been worked, the request fulfilled by the moment of monetary extraction.²⁶⁶

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 135.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

²⁶⁵ For London’s discussion of realism and tramping, see Chapter II.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

Contrary to these realists, to whom he claims “it would be cheaper” to “confine [his] benefactions,” Howells identifies “indigent literature” as that “which presents itself with these imaginative demands, and I think usually fictionists of the romantic school.”²⁶⁷ Seemingly both enamored with and frustrated by the romanticists, these nebulous figures fall closer into the realm of the con artist, elevating plot over character and catching Howells up in the elaborate mechanics of their story. In these anecdotes we find “the gentleman thrown out of employment by the completion of an encyclopedia he had been at work on” who, having been evicted along with his family, Howells provides money to and promises to find publication for a first hand account of his eviction.²⁶⁸ Howells insists “that this sort of thing mostly happened to the inarticulate classes; and that he had the chance of doing a perfectly fresh thing in literature,” but this encyclopedist, after receiving a bridge loan from Howells to complete his essay, disappears.²⁶⁹ Similarly, the man who arrives in Howells’s apartment by way of a back elevator, calls him by name, and requests money to complete his travels, having “fallen prey to the hard times in the very hour of the most prosperous speculation,” manages to take Howells’s money and never repay.²⁷⁰ Classifying this man as “of an order of classic impostors dear to literature, and grown all too few in these times of hurry and fierce competition,” Howells fails to admit that both the realist and the romantic beggars have all adequately accomplished their stated ends of receiving recompense from a bourgeois buyer in return for their story, whether it be tragically banal or enticingly outlandish.²⁷¹ The lumpen

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

authors of these narratives adopt and repurpose the market relations of literary publishing, crafting stories that must be bought, marking the point at which the structure of capitalist accumulation becomes repurposed to meet the individual's immediate need. In much the same way, Howells's remarks on charity mark an inversion wherein his focus upon personal absolutions of guilt rather than the scale of the capitalist world-system places the onus of responsibility upon the individual lest the structure be found fundamentally unsound:

A great many good people do not earn their money, and yet by universal consent they seem to have a right to it. We can oblige the poor to earn their money any more than the rich, without attacking the principle on which society is based and classing ourselves with its enemies. If people get money out of other people, we ought not to ask how they get it, whether it is much or little.²⁷²

Howells fundamentally refuses “attacking the principle on which society is based” and in doing so, can only see this lumpen literature as failed. Yet, if as Benjamin suggests, “storytelling as it has long flourished in the world of manual labor...is itself a form of artisanal labor,” then the trade of begging has developed its own form of storytelling, one suited to the necessity of the nebulous figures giving shape to these narratives, adopting realism and romanticism as improvisatory forms by which wageless life can arrive at materially reproducing itself. Howells's aesthetic judgements miss the mark—himself, who purchased these stories.²⁷³

Both the riotocratic social networks of mutual aid lingering behind the scenes in “An East-Side Ramble” and the poetic overflows of the nebulous figures found in “Tribulations of a Cheerful Giver” also appear within Howells's 1890 magnum opus of urban realism, *A*

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁷³ Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov,” trans. Tess Lewis, in *The Storyteller Essays*, ed. Samuel Titan (New York: NYRB, 2019), 56.

Hazard of New Fortunes. This New York set novel assuredly aspires to Lukács’s realist criteria of illustrating “the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society,” but it largely confines itself to portraying these relationships as *merely* deeper, hidden, mediated, and not immediately perceptible, alluding to them only to brush them quickly aside as beyond the capacity of the narrative vision to linger upon for too long lest they develop and blossom, potentially unbalancing the text’s stalwart devotion to the mediating force of petite-bourgeois liberalism (foremost characterized by Basil and Isabel March). Kaplan notes that “Howells has long been unfairly criticized for his lack of lower-class characters—and therefore for his lack of ‘realism,’” arguing that in Howells’s novel “realism...is a process of imagining and managing the threats of social change inscribed in the ‘unreal city.’”²⁷⁴ I do not contend, however, that *A Hazard of New Fortunes* does not meet the genre standards of realism but rather that its nearly absent “other half,” that corollary to its “wide range of middle-class characters,” demonstrates the limits of realism’s capacity to nullify the utopian desires for the abolition of wage labor, that it is precisely because of the scantiness of Howells’s portrayal of nebulous figures that his novel’s world remains so tenuous and subject to contingency even after its attempt at excising conflictual excess in its conclusion, the riotocracy just present enough to be unknowable and therefore still unfinished, still ongoing.²⁷⁵

While Kaplan rightly observes that “the narrative distinguishes a colony of interrelated characters in the foreground against a background of fragmented objects and

²⁷⁴ Kaplan, *Social Construction*, 47.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

characterless masses”²⁷⁶ and that the “panorama of contiguous objects absorbs the poor into a naturalized cityscape overflowing with sights and noises but devoid of full human figures or speech,” the language of these small moments making up the novel’s “background” deserves closer attention as Howells writes them with an open-endedness that when viewed *in toto* make up something of a counter-narrative, one in which the nebula comes to act as a subject of an alternative (yet to arrive) novel made up of these minute fragments, a lumpen-realism expectantly waiting in the wings.²⁷⁷ Take for instance the case of the vanishing socialist. As Basil March and his business partner Fulkerson dine at Maroni’s, a restaurant full “of all nationalities and religions apparently,”²⁷⁸ Fulkerson tells the story of their angel investor, the natural gas tycoon of Moffitt Indiana, Mr. Dryfoos, before he interrupts himself to point out “a short, dark, foreign-looking man going out of the door,” disgustedly noting that “they say that fellow’s a socialist.”²⁷⁹ While Fulkerson goes on to claim that these socialists should be “shut up in jail” for their “poison,” Howells writes that “March did not notice the vanishing socialist”; instead, he observes the first glimpse of his old German teacher and the novel’s primary synecdochic mouthpiece for working class radicalism, Lindau, entering the restaurant.²⁸⁰ While Howells exchanges “the vanishing socialist” for the socialist he’ll come to prominently insert into the plot machinations of *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the “short, dark, foreign-looking man going out of the door” remains within the city, an unresolvable threat drifting into the nebula. That Maroni’s becomes a site where one

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 52.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 53.

²⁷⁸ Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 69.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 72.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

socialist walks out as another walks in highlights the nebulous social networks that this novel's bourgeois gaze cannot pierce, the relations between these figures undeveloped and uncertain. The vanishing socialist haunts this novel, a trace of the riotocracy, a figure hinting at an underground current running through the city, one that seeks to upend the regime of capital, a signal that the masses Howells describes as the Marches investigate the city contain more depth than the surface reading of visual signifiers the Marches cling to, lives in excess of immiseration that can disappear into the crowded background.

Then there's Jen, the woman the Marches witness evading capture by the police. As the Marches leave a soiree of bourgeois aesthetes (a party at which they have been introduced to the socialite reformer Margaret Vance), they encounter a scene harshly juxtaposed with the elegant trappings in which they had only just been enmeshed: "A wild laughing cry suddenly broke upon the air at the street crossing in front of them. A girl's voice called out, 'Run, run, Jen! The copper is after you.' A woman's figure rushed stumbling across the way and into the shadow of the houses, pursued by a burly policeman."²⁸¹ Jen remains within the nebula, only described as "a woman's figure" who disappears from both the Marches and the "burly policeman" by vanishing into the "shadow of the houses," her name only made available to the reader through the imperative warnings of her comrade imploring her to escape from the clutches of authority. Jen and her unnamed comrade alert us not only to the sociality of fugitive flight but also to a subset of unruly women threatening the order of state control. Jen, successfully able to evade the police, hints at another world coterminous with the novel's, one that briefly breaks into it, a narrative thread broken and

²⁸¹ Ibid., 224-5.

discontinued the moment it becomes obscured by the shadows within which Howells's realism cannot find its way, an unvariegated scenic backdrop wherein Jen simply disperses into the haze. After witnessing this chase, Basil asks Isabel: "Can that poor wretch and the radiant girl we left yonder really belong to the same system of things? How incredible each makes the other seem!"²⁸² Basil's question, one meant to portray an awed recognition that a single society could produce both the charmed life of Margaret Vance and the criminalized life of Jen, inadvertently highlights the fact that they in fact do not "belong to the same system of things." In Howells's realism, Jen does not belong to the bourgeois class of characters who receive psychological depth like Margaret Vance; instead, Jen belongs to a separate unwritten novel, a character who resists the capture of the realist novel and the capture of the police.

Unlike the vanishing socialist and Jen, the French chiffonier bears remarking upon twice—first as tragedy, then as farce. During the Marches search for a house, shortly after Isabel March has proclaimed that "I don't believe there's any *real* suffering—not real *suffering*—among the people; that is, it would be suffering from our point of view, but they've been used to it all their lives, and they don't feel their discomfort so much,"²⁸³ she sights the French chiffonier, "a decently dressed person who walked beside them, next the gutter, stooping over as if to examine it, and half halting at times."²⁸⁴ After Isabel exclaims to Basil that she has seen the man "pick up a dirty bit of cracker from the pavement and cram it

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 225.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁸⁵ As Kaplan has it: "The narrative, however, immediately undermines Isabel's distinction between 'real' and 'unreal' suffering through the sudden appearance alongside the Marches of a 'decently dressed person' rummaging through the garbage heap. This beggar emerges from nowhere, like the return of the repressed, to deny their denial of 'real' misery." *Social Construction*, 52.

into his mouth and eat it down as if he were famished,” the two begin to follow him, watching “in fascination of the sight” as he continues to search the gutters for sustenance.²⁸⁶ Basil approaches the man, finds he speaks French and no English, and provides him a single coin for which he is thanked profusely. After this brief encounter, “the man lapsed back into the mystery of misery out of which he had emerged.”²⁸⁷ It is this “mystery of misery” (that was in an earlier literary formulation the “mystery of the city”) which perplexes the Marches and drives their own anxious relationship to the vagaries of socio-economic standing, demonstrating both the vicissitudes of fortune which can result in *déclassement* and the sheer breadth of the gulf of unknowability which prevents the Marches, and Howells, from narrativizing wageless life. The “mystery of misery” lies not only in the French chiffonier’s particular tale of hardship to which they lack access but also in the ongoing social reproduction of lumpen life. The uncertainty of the latter leads to the instability of how the Marches read the French beggar, an alternate interpretation proposed by Basil at the end of novel calls forth this nebulous figure once again: “Yet the beggar’s intrusion is never laid to rest; suddenly recalling him at the end of the novel, Basil speculates that he was probably a confidence man, and thereby negates his reality.”²⁸⁸ However, contra Kaplan, I see Basil’s speculation of the French chiffonier’s possible con as *heightening* his reality, opening up the possibility that the mystery of poverty may contain more than mere misery. Even as Basil asks “what do you think of a civilization that makes the opportunity of such a fraud,” he stakes a claim regarding the limits of realism, stating that “he was the ideal of the suffering

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Kaplan, *Social Construction*, 52.

which would be less effective if realistically treated.”²⁸⁹ The mystery of misery here becomes transformed into the problem of realism, a reversion to the typifying tendencies of the romance as a necessity to flatten out nebulous figures lest they become too robust to be so neatly held in a few passing lines of description, characters too resistant to be represented.²⁹⁰

Finally, we must come to Lindau, that German émigré Basil considers “a political economist of an unusual type,”²⁹¹ the man who “was himself a romanticist of the Victor Hugo sort” but who translates a bit of Dostoyevsky realism for inclusion in Basil and Fulkerson’s magazine venture *Every Other Week*, the figure Howells overloads as embodying the descent of leftist dissensus.²⁹² While Lindau’s socialism most proximately evokes the figures of the German Haymarket anarchists of 1886 (August Spies, George Engel, Michael Schwab, Louis Lingg, and Adolph Fischer), his characterization more robustly alludes to another radical, historical undercurrent, that of August Willich, Franz Sigel, and Joseph Weydemeyer, those German figures of the Civil War who saw the conflict as a possible opening for a broader revolutionary overturning of private property and white supremacy. Lindau, who Basil remembers as a man “starving along with a sick wife and a sick newspaper” and “was fighting the antislavery battle just as naturally at Indianapolis in 1858 as he fought behind the barricades at Berlin in 1848,” marks the nexus of a transatlantic temporality, linking 1848, 1861, and 1886 and in so doing politically solders a connective tradition between European socialism, abolitionist war communism and the Black General

²⁸⁹ Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, 398.

²⁹⁰ “Fragments threaten to intrude into the foreground, and the background threatens to engulf the characters.” Kaplan, *Social Construction*, 54.

²⁹¹ Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, 266.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 174.

Strike, and anarchist *attentat*.²⁹³ Lindau, the former radical publisher, echoes Colonel Weydemeyer, the founder of New York's *Die Revolution* (the first place to publish Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* that thus provides the most lengthy theorization of the lumpenproletariat an American provenance) who "stood out for his insistence that the white working class could not be addressed separately from the question of slavery."²⁹⁴ When Lindau rebuts Basil's assertion that he lost his hand in the war fighting for the preservation of the state, he responds in German: "Do you think I knowingly gave my hand to save this oligarchy of traders and tricksters, this aristocracy of railroad wreckers and stock gamblers and mine slave drivers and mill serf owners? No; I gave it to the slave; the slave—Ha! Ha! Ha!—whom I helped to unshackle to the common liberty of hunger and cold."²⁹⁵ This proclamation, one that laments "the non-event of emancipation insinuated by the perpetuation of the plantation system and the refiguration of subjection," ties Lindau's current anarcho-communistic commitments to that throughline of an unfinished and still ongoing revolutionary struggle against capital.²⁹⁶ It is in fact a conversation regarding Lindau's missing hand (caught in a kind of representational limbo somewhere between a mirrored inverse of the Smithian invisible hand of the capitalist free market lost in the struggle to negate these very private property relations and the antithesis of the "iron hand"²⁹⁷ of state repression invoked by Fulkerson which will in the novel's climactic strike take Lindau's entire arm through the blow delivered by a strike breaking cop's baton) that prompts Lindau's most

²⁹³ *Ibis*, 81.

²⁹⁴ Walter Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 133-4.

²⁹⁵ Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, 171.

²⁹⁶ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 116.

²⁹⁷ Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, 369.

stringent disavowal of nationalism, asking Basil: “What gountry hass a poor man got, Mr. Marge?”²⁹⁸ Not only does Lindau’s query mark his communistic yearnings as separate and distinct from any form of nationalist recuperation (placing them squarely in the dissolution of the nation-state form found in the riotocracy), it also exposes an underlying conceit of Howellsian realism. For, if the resolution of this novel’s conflicts functions as an allegory for maintaining American liberal consensus amidst the growing fractures of the Gilded Age, Lindau’s death at the hands of the police attempts to excise the radical histories carried within this character, crafting a more manageable representational totality. By extension, we could ask “what novel has a poor man got?” and hear Howells’s answer as, at the very least, “not this one.”

Through Lindau we are able to catch a glimpse of the riotocratic underpinnings of the novel’s ragged underclass. He lives in a tenement off Mott Street, having left his room in Greenwich Village because he “was beginning to forget the boor,”²⁹⁹ desiring instead to live with “[his] brothers—the beccars and the thieves.”³⁰⁰ He leaves food on his table for the children in the building to steal, practicing a mutual aid, telling March that he prefers they steal it rather than accept it as a gift as “they mostn’t go and feel themselves petter than those boor millionairss that hadt to steal their money.”³⁰¹ He refuses to take his military pension from a corrupt government and only allows March to pay him directly for his translations (and will go on to give all the money back once he discovers the angel investor Mr. Dryfoos is a union buster). Its Lindau who angrily responds to Basil’s assertion that

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 168.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

wealthy capitalists do good by “giv[ing] work to armies of poor people”: “They *give* work! They allow their helpless brothers to earn enough to keep life in them! They give *work*! Who is it gives *toil*, and where will your rich men be when once the poor shall refuse to give toil?”³⁰² And it's Lindau who dies in the riot, killed by police who are attempting to bust the streetcar strike. With all these acts in mind, criticism like that of Eric Shocket's which claims Lindau has no clearly delineated political commitments sound especially dissonant:

“...Lindau is a catalyst whose own political actions and beliefs are murky. Readers know he is a socialist because other characters say he is a socialist; beyond that, there is no evidence. We never see him engaged in collective political struggle. This does not, however, seem to matter a great deal. Within the novel, it is not the content but the facts of socialism that threatens to interrupt the making of ‘new fortunes.’”³⁰³

This reading only holds to the extent that Shocket insists on interpreting Howell's text as a strike novel, one wherein socialism possesses an all too narrow definition. Thus, his contention that the novel “channels and contains what might otherwise prove anticonsensual” misses all that remains unresolvable.³⁰⁴ In Lindau's mutual aid, solidarity with rioters, and most importantly his refusals to work and his refusals of wages, he displays a political capacity in excess of reform, highlighting a longer and more capacious trajectory of political possibility centered upon the struggles to abolish wage labor itself. The vanishing socialist, Jen's absconding from authority, the French beggar-*cum*-conman, and Lindau's spatio-temporal commingling of communisms all make up the nebula, that vast terrain of life against the wage that *A Hazard of New Fortunes* cannot articulately elaborate and thus cannot fully enmesh and subsume within capitalist totality.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 170.

³⁰³ Eric Shocket, *Vanishing Moments: Class and American Literature* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 101.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

“Yeh’ve Edder Got teh Go teh Hell or Go teh Work!”

Unlike *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, which performs its disappearances around the margins (or in the case of Lindau, vanishes his hand, then his arm, then his life as the cost of casting his lot with the marginal), Stephen Crane’s naturalist novella of the Bowery performs a more thorough and ultimately perplexing trick—devising a vanishing act upon its titular protagonist. In 1893’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Crane (writing under the pseudonym of Johnston Smith), crafts his tenement tale as a teleological march, a tragic fall from grace tale wherein the individual, Maggie, will become the nameless “girl of the streets,” the title itself laying the path by which the particular will find itself dissolved into the typification of the general.³⁰⁵ This telos marks the dominant narratological mode of the naturalist novel, a generic branching off from realism which propels itself forward (or as is more often the case, downward) via the momentum of an inbuilt structure of inherent inevitability. Crane’s characterization of Maggie therefore burdens her with an allegorical weight of an entire class of urban, working women who live and work under conditions of enormous precarity at the *fin de siècle*. What the naturalist offshoot thematizes (despite its own intentions) is not human nature, not an inbuilt set of genetic characteristics predisposing a character to an inevitable

³⁰⁵ As Alan Trachtenberg argues: “For Crane the plot was an occasion to tell a familiar tale with vividness, with exactness of observation, and most of all, with sufficient irony to make it apparent that the characters themselves viewed their world melodramatically, through lenses blurred with the same false emotions they inspired—as ‘low life’—in the many popular tellers of their tale. Crane aims at accuracy, not compassion. The story is a complicated piece of parody written with a serious regard for the task of rendering a false tale truly.” “Experiments in Another Country: Stephen Crane’s City Sketches,” in *American Realism: New Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 145.

fate, but rather the nature of capital, of its tendency to immiserate and alienate, to submerge a subject into the class formation of the lower depths.³⁰⁶

Maggie follows a young woman's immersion into the realm of the commodity, the menacingly cruel and impersonal world of appearances. Crane first describes Maggie, as having "blossomed in a mud puddle," becoming "a most rare and wonderful production of a tenement district, a pretty girl".³⁰⁷ From the first moment Maggie enters into the narrative, it is as an anomalous "production" *of and from* her class, differentiated by her appearance, by the implication that she does not outwardly fit into her surroundings which have produced more typified variations on the theme of impoverishment. Yet, it's precisely Maggie's appearance which provokes the novel's dramatic tension. As her brother tells her that "yeh've edder got teh go teh hell or go teh work!," Maggie settles upon going to work "having the feminine aversion of going to hell."³⁰⁸ Work and hell are the two diametrically opposed options, either a commitment to the daily grind of the semi-respectability of the working poor of her tenement district or the gendered "hell" of a fall from her class into the *bas-fonds*, into the criminalized occupation of sex work.

Crane describes Maggie's workplace, that locale which may not be hell but may just as well be purgatory, as a grim site. Once again, Crane focuses upon the masking of appearances, and we see Maggie and a coterie of anonymous women workers fashioning garment accoutrement: "By chance, she got a position in an establishment where they made

³⁰⁶ See Dominique Kalifa, *Vice, Crime, and Poverty: How the Western Imagination Invented the Underworld*, trans. Susan Emanuel (NY: Columbia University Press, 2019) for a detailed study of how the lower depths emerges in the nineteenth-century as a nameable cultural representation.

³⁰⁷ Stephen Crane, *Maggie*, in *Prose and Poetry*, (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 24.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

collars and cuffs. She received a stool and a machine in a room where sat twenty girls of various shades of yellow discontent. She perched on the stool and treadled at her machine all day, turning out collars, the name of whose brand could be noted for its irrelevancy to anything in connection with collars.”³⁰⁹ In Melville’s “The Tartarus of Maids,” he had invoked the “yet more pallid faces of all the pallid girls” which the working women (who are only ever called girls and who have had to abandon all but that utterly constant twelve hour daily labor) have come to take on, a living embodiment the blank whiteness of the pages they produce, coming themselves to resemble the commodity in the moment that their labor has been commodified in industrial production; writing nearly forty years later, Crane describes this production process as having jaundiced over time (much as that paper produced would have yellowed over the intervening years), one in which the anonymous amalgamation of these women on the production floor are made distinct personages only by those “various shades of yellow discontent.”³¹⁰ That the company bears a name which is only remarkable in its utter “irrelevancy” from the manufacturing of collars only emphasizes the disconnect which has produced the sickly discontent of Maggie’s coworkers, an estrangement ever heightening. If in Melville’s allegory, the commodity produced appeared to physically subsume the visage of labor, in Crane’s naturalism that proximity has all but disappeared as the alienation on the factory floor has come to bear no resemblance to the specifics of the commodity.

³⁰⁹ Crane, *Maggie*, 24.

³¹⁰ Herman Melville, “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” in *Billy Budd and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 285.

As Maggie begins to see the womanizing bartender Pete, the man whose seductions will eventually cause her to be cast out from her familial home, her thoughts increasingly turn against her site of employment: “The air in the collar and cuff establishment strangled her. She knew she was gradually and surely shriveling in the hot, stuffy room...The place was filled with a whirl of noises and odors.” Worried she would soon find herself “in an exasperating future, as a scrawny woman with an eternal grievance,” Maggie desperately hopes to remove herself from the work she considers to be deadening her imaginary, yet it remains the physical toll of toil which causes her the greatest consternation.³¹¹ If her beauty is what has made her particular, exceptional and distinct from within her class position, it is the possible loss of this which portends an irreparable theft, one in excess of the theft of the surplus value she produces in the endless production of collars and cuffs:

She wondered as she regarded some of the grizzled women in the room, mere mechanical contrivances sewing seams and grinding out, with heads bended over their work, tales of imagined or real girl-hood happiness, past drunks, the baby at home, and unpaid wages. She speculated how long her youth would endure. She began to see the bloom upon her cheeks as valuable.³¹²

In this moment, we see Maggie rejecting not only the drudgery of work but also the sutures of class which would bind her to these “grizzled women” who she believes to have been transformed into “mere mechanical contrivances.”³¹³ What Maggie (and Crane) crucially miss in this scene, what remains un(der)developed and fatally unexplored is precisely how this further elaboration of the “yellow discontent” on the production line masks a great

³¹¹ Crane, *Maggie*, 34.

³¹² *Ibid.*

³¹³ “It must be acknowledged that our worker emerges from the process of production looking different from when he entered it.” Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 415.

antagonism with working conditions which resonate with Maggie's own, a linkage of anti-work feeling and a possible grounds upon which solidarity against work can begin to blossom goes unfulfilled. These "tales of imagined or real girl-hood happiness, past drunks, the baby at home, and unpaid wages" mark out a terrain of daydreaming *contra*-work and of swapping tales about their mutual experiences of exploitation: the shared stories of play and joy known prior to the entrance into the labor market, the times of revelry and joy engaged in despite employment's strictures, the second shift of unwaged domestic life they must inevitably perform, and the failure to even receive the wage which the collar and cuff company owes them for work and thus the revelation of the power relation undergirding the wage contract itself. That the conditions of labor tend towards the attempt to subsume these workers into nothing else but their productivity may be true, but the inclusion of what the workplace sounds like, what narratives pass among and between the women on the line undercuts any suggestion that they are "mere mechanical contrivances." Though Maggie described their boss as a "detestable creature" who "sat all day delivering orations, in the depths of a cushioned chair," a man whose "pocketbook deprived them of the power of retort," she does not seem to join in with the collective indirect retort of those complaints and grudges over wages unpaid.³¹⁴ Despite its own intentions, the novel, by attempting to provide a "realist" portrait of miserable working conditions, has demonstrated the very class activity which remains a fuse for collective action and sabotage, the "yellow discontent" of these women looking from another angle more and more like *red* discontent, a nascent

³¹⁴ Crane, *Maggie*, 34.

dissent against the value drained from their days and nights by both industrial and domestic labor.

Crane portrays the source of Maggie's yearnings for social advancement in the recognition of a connection between her vitality and a potential value, one which remains imminently susceptible to slipping away from her ownership. Yet this potential value remains reliant for its realization upon the marriage contract and Maggie fails to see that like her boss, Pete can exploit the terms of the agreement from a position of power. When Maggie finds herself thrown out of her familial home by her mother and brother who both see her attempts to leverage sexuality into a domestic coupling which could bring her out of the depths of poverty found in the tenement as moral failures which bring shame upon their family, Pete spurns her as well. Maggie's rapid *déclassement* leaves her without social attachments and cuts her off from the tenement (though one kindly neighbor does demonstrate an act of solidarity by offering Maggie one night of respite in her apartment). Crane describes Maggie's descent out of the working class and into the lower depths as the experience of wandering, of movement in the city which lacks purposive clarity: "She wandered aimlessly for several blocks. She stopped once and asked aloud a question of herself: 'Who?'" Maggie's sensation of being without direction, of being absent a destination she can move towards, signals the crisis moment of no longer being ensconced within her prior class position, an uncertainty so profound that her soliloquized questioning highlights the loss of identity. Cut off from housing, community, and the wage, Maggie "discovered that if she walked with such apparent aimlessness, some men looked at her with calculating eyes" so instead "she adopted a demeanor of intentness as if going somewhere" in order to

protect herself.³¹⁵ This “aimlessness,” the drift which marks Maggie’s entry into the nebula, must by necessity become overlaid with the veneer of purposiveness in order to mask the condition of wagelessness which is read by certain men as synonymous with sex work.

It is precisely at the moment of Maggie’s *déclassement*, however, that Crane’s attention to Maggie as a particular, psychologically detailed, character abruptly cuts off. Maggie’s life outside the wage relation becomes simply unnarratable within this novel: “Upon a wet evening, several months after the last chapter...”³¹⁶ In this chapter, Maggie loses her name, becoming “a girl of the painted cohorts of the city”³¹⁷ and “the girl of the crimson legions.”³¹⁸ Now that Maggie has moved out of the formal wage economy into the realm of sex work, the specific contours of her internal and external life fall away as the narrator’s viewpoint becomes significantly more limited. Maggie’s exit from the wage has made her, in Amy Dru Stanley’s formulation, “a lurid symbol of contract freedom.”³¹⁹ Having lost her home and her name, Maggie falls into a position of atomized impoverishment unique to her gender, a precarity tightrope even more difficult to balance and navigate as a woman:

The prostitute thus emerged on the streets against a backdrop of dependency relations even more complicated than those leading men to beg. Directly and indirectly, women were vulnerable to the impersonal whims of the market economy and to the official whims of the state. And they were vulnerable to the personal whims of their menfolk, as well. By prostituting themselves, women left the matrix of legitimate dependence for the netherworld of the criminally dependent.³²⁰

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 70.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 72.

³¹⁹ Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 235.

³²⁰ Ibid., 227.

As a sex worker in the “netherworld of the criminally dependent,” Maggie has finally found herself gone “teh hell,” yet Crane seems unable to say much about the long-foreshadowed destination. How Maggie has survived these months, what networks amongst the “painted cohorts” she must surely have developed in this brief span, Crane’s naturalism cannot incorporate into the text’s social world, remaining an opaque incorporation into the totality of capitalist social relations. The so-called surplus population of the female nebulous figures in the text only appear in passing (such as the scene in which the sly Nellie rolls a drunken Pete for his money, a brief moment in which a sly mode of survival outside the wage contract is made manifest). By writing Maggie into a metonymy for an entire social class, Crane makes his own genre tale into a mirror of the overblown sentiments of the melodramas Pete takes Maggie to see which Maggie considers to be “transcendental realism.”³²¹ Except here, instead of the rags to riches tale in which every pauper can be a prince, we have its obverse in which every woman outside of the marriage or wage contract is but one tragic step from that “netherworld of the criminally dependent.” Yet in the last scene featuring the girl of the streets, as she stands next to the river with her soon to be murderer, “some hidden factory sent up a yellow glare, that lit for a moment the waters lapping oilily against timbers.”³²² The girl of the crimson legions dies in the yellowed pallor of industrial accumulation’s nighttime glow, a reminder of the ever looming threat implied in the purely formal freedom by which work is exchanged for wages, the always imminent possibility of being cast into the outer dark of the lower depths.

“A Poor Man Ain’t Nowhere”

³²¹ Crane, *Maggie*, 36.

³²² *Ibid.*, 72.

The disappearances of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* and *Maggie* that we have so far encountered are sites of contradiction the realist novel cannot resolve *sans* excision, gaps in content and form whereby totality as both representational and methodological remains incomplete. These moments do not mark failures but rather entryways into the un(der)written, the incompleteness itself an opportunity to observe how capitalism cannot fully encompass the subject, that its ongoingness in fact relies upon these tensions as much as its possible dismantling, the nebulous remainder both necessity and threat. Theodore Dreiser's 1900 novel *Sister Carrie*, that pinnacle of American naturalism at the *fin de siècle*, provides perhaps the most capacious possibilities for an engagement with the un(der)written totality as its focus upon the protean nature of an individual's class position so often belies the collective experiences of class as a social relation. Yet as a novel so explicitly concerned with countervailing forces, *Sister Carrie* produces its own hermeneutic for reading its antitheses, for formulating a critique of this atomized, petty bourgeois aspiration by piecing together the traces of another narrative seam barely visible in the background. A streak of anti-work utopianism runs throughout the novel but one which can only be read in negative relief, as an impression running counter to the written, as the novel explicitly depicts time and again a problem at the core of life oriented around the value form. Here, all the attempted escapes from work of Carrie and Hurstwood remain staunchly individualistic, the dreams extending not to an escape *for* a class but an escape *from* a class, and its this refusal of collective orientation which creates the conditions of possibility for Hurstwood's precipitous fall and Carrie's rapid ascent.

To read *Sister Carrie* in this manner, for its latent possibilities and unrealized potentialities, I contend that we should read Dreiser's naturalism in reverse, for the work he pursued in the decades after the publication of *Sister Carrie* in order to see what may be lingering in that novel which we may otherwise overlook if we only concern ourselves with Dreiser up until the moment of the novel's composition. Let us begin then with Dreiser at the end, the Dreiser of 1945, the Dreiser whose letter to William Z. Foster is published in the pages of *The Daily Worker* on July 30th less than five months from his death and declares that "I am writing this letter to tell you of my desire to become a member of the American Communist organization." This overture continues:

This request is rooted in convictions that I have long held and that have been strengthened and deepened by the years. I have believe intensely that the common people, and first of all the workers,—of the United States and of the world—are the guardians of their own destiny and the creators of their own future. I have endeavored to live by this faith, to clothe it in words and symbols, to explore its full meaning in the lives of men and women."³²³

Herein we discern an invitation for looking backward, to see Dreiser's fiction as always already animated by the tenets of the communistic, that the "words and symbols" of his entire oeuvre have all along been fellow travelers. In this letter, he stakes out an alliance between the aspirations of communism and the aspirations of his literary naturalism, claiming the former as a hope irrevocably entrenched in the latter's "words and symbols." These "convictions" which have only "been strengthened and deepened by the years" thus must be present in weaker and shallower forms, nascent expressions which still contend that "the common people" possess an autonomy as "creators of their own future," as themselves

³²³ Theodore Dreiser, "Theodore Dreiser Joins the Communist Party: *Daily Worker*, 30 July 1945," in *Theodore Dreiser: Political Writings* ed. Jude Davies (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 288.

capable of crafting new horizons. Yet, if we opt to be rightly skeptical of the tenor of this letter, if it reads too formulaically in the genre of the official party line, if it has been in fact ghostwritten by John Howard Lawson and not Dreiser, we can turn to the period of Dreiser's earlier attempt to join the Communist Party in 1932.³²⁴ After his time spent in Harlan County Kentucky, Dreiser writes in the introduction to *Harlan Miners Speak: Report on Terrorism in the Kentucky Coal Fields* of the failings of any epistemological position oriented away from the collective:

...what I cannot understand is why the American people which has been drilled from the beginning in the necessity and the advantage of the individual and his point of view, does not now realize how complete is the collapse of that idea as a working social formula. For while, on the one hand, we have arrogated to each of ourselves the right to be a giant individual if we can, we have not seen how impossible it is for more than a very few, if so many, to achieve this.³²⁵

This critique of possessive individualism answers with profound clarity the question posed in Harlan County by Florence Reece in 1931 of “which side are you on?” If, however, we contend that this Dreiser merely evidences the historical tendencies of the broader Popular Front milieu, we can turn our looking backward further to “The Toil of the Laborer” composed in 1903-4 in which we can find a pointed and stringent analysis of all that surplus value stolen during the regimented horrors of the working day: “For every motion and every bend here some one else was deriving the privilege not to move and not bend there. It was as if some untoward power was momentarily taking something from each of these, and giving it, uncalled for, to someone who did not even know whence it came. The measured

³²⁴ Jude Davies, ed., *Theodore Dreiser: Political Writings*, 287.

³²⁵ Theodore Dreiser, “Introduction to *Harlan Miners Speak: Report on Terrorism in the Kentucky Coal Fields*” in *Theodore Dreiser: Political Writings* ed. Jude Davies (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 167.

increase of their profit was so plainly visible.”³²⁶ This passage illustrates a thermodynamic rendering of capital whereby work itself begets an ill-gotten leisure, each strenuous action swaddling ever deeper in idle comfort some bourgeois personage elsewhere. It also resounds strongly with his own formulation of naturalism in *Sister Carrie* in which those accumulating know an idleness that is pleasure and those losing know an idleness that is only torture, “the tragic and vertical motions of rising and falling: the motion of the rocking chair.”³²⁷

What would it mean then to read *Sister Carrie* as a seedbed of the communistic principles which would months before his death blossom into Dreiser’s declaration that these political principles had been a part of his aesthetic imagination all along? Not simply reading this novel as a precursor of Dreiser’s formal declaration of his membership within a political party but rather as a text anticipating and longing for an interruption of this logic of labor which is anything but natural? How would attending to the utopian impulses clothed in words and symbols allow us to read this novel otherwise? Might an attention to the dream of revolution, that turning which is always an overturning, that break in the thermodynamics of capitalist accumulation, posit a break in our own critical monomania, no longer so singularly affixed to the ceaseless motion of the rocking chair’s groove, its absolute and irrevocable stuckness, but instead attending to the real movement of things which seeks the abolition of the value form altogether?³²⁸ In mapping a utopia which is but the no-place of a desire to

³²⁶ Theodore Dreiser, “The Toil of the Laborer,” in *Theodore Dreiser: Political Writings* ed. Jude Davies (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 20.

³²⁷ Phillip Fisher, “Acting, Reading, Fortune’s Wheel: *Sister Carrie* and the Life History of Objects,” in *American Realism: New Essays* ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 260.

³²⁸ As Kaplan argues: “The rocking chair is the place where characters do not just observe the world outside their windows, but where they dream their sentimental fantasies of escape” *Social Construction*, 144. Attending to those dreams not dreamt from the rocking chair may allow our critical gaze to shift away from

escape the drudgeries and toils of a deadly regime of labor which is every-place, *Sister Carrie* demonstrates that any such escape remains an incomplete flight so long as it is made individually and merely purchased by an arduous working somewhere else further down the commodity chain, depicting a world wherein the sentiment of consumption rests upon the violence of extraction.

I suggest then a reading of this novel which arises out of those whose names are unknown, those nebulous figures haunting the fringes. Take for instance the scene with the beggar outside of the theatre:

“Say, mister,” said a voice at Hurstwood’s side—“would you mind giving me the price of a bed?”

Hurstwood was interestedly remarking to Carrie.

“Honest to God, mister, I’m without a place to sleep.”

The plea was that of a gaunt-faced man of about twenty-eight, who looked the picture of privation and wretchedness. Drouet was the first to see. He handed over a dime with an upswelling of pity in his heart. Hurstwood scarcely noticed the incident. Carrie quickly forgot.

“Well, sir,” concluded Hurstwood, just before leaving them, “there isn’t anything better than a good play, is there?”

“I like a comedy best,” said Drouet.³²⁹

In this brief scene, we can see something of a comedy of errors unfolding within the broader trajectories of the novel itself. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, that origin of the lumpenproletariat as a class to be analyzed, Marx contends that the idleness of the down and out has its mirror in the aristocratic idleness of the haute bourgeoisie, and we see something akin to this mirroring play itself out here. Carrie, who had only a short time ago been “a work-seeker, an

those politics of sentimental escape (ones which we as readers are implicated within) and towards those of the material deprivations engendered by the wage labor form, from dreams of escape from work which bring ones individually up the social ladder towards collective dreams of abandonment which serve as a levelling and a razing.

³²⁹ Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, ed. John C. Berkey, Alice M. Winters, James L.W. West III, Neda M. Westlake (New York: Penguin, 1994), 139.

outcast without employment,” quickly forgets this momentary intrusion as she continually denies any sociality that is not explicitly bourgeois.³³⁰ Just as she refused to see herself as contiguous with the women laboring in that workshop of “hard contract,” she similarly refuses to recognize this beggar as a member of the very class she would occupy had that chance reunion with Drouet on the streets of Chicago not come to pass.³³¹ Meanwhile, Hurstwood scarcely notices the man, someone who he will quickly come to resemble once he realizes that “managing was nothing that could be had for the asking.”³³² Like Carrie, Hurstwood can never place himself as anything but bourgeois, hence why even in his last ditch effort at employment as a strikebreaker on the Brooklyn trolley lines, he can only ever sympathize with the strikers rather than participate in the rituals of solidarity which would ensure he did not cross the picket line. Finally, Drouet, who hands over a dime, does so merely as a perfunctory act, a mere performance of a sociality *sans* humanity (despite the “upswelling of pity in his heart”), for as Dreiser has earlier remarked of this character, “he would have gladly handed out what was considered the proper portion to give beggars and thought nothing more about it.”³³³ In this passing moment, Carrie, Hurstwood, and Drouet all demonstrate the limits of their respective desires for idleness which have been subsidized by the forced idleness of this “gaunt-faced man of about twenty-eight, who looked the picture of privation and wretchedness.” This privation arises directly out of the privatization of all those dreams of a world without work, the utopian possibilities of *omnia sunt communia*

³³⁰ Ibid., 22.

³³¹ Ibid., 39.

³³² Ibid., 287.

³³³ Ibid., 63.

replaced by the resolutely singular aspirations fomented within the comfort of the self as means and ends alone.

Throughout the novel, Carrie and Hurstwood continually display a reticence to work, yet it is not this desire which is the wrong one but rather that they continually see themselves as particularly unfit for labor rather than labor under capitalism being generally unfit for all who are forced to undertake it. In the scabbing scene, Hurstwood waits in line with two other unemployed men discussing their conflicted relationship to breaking the picket line.³³⁴ These two commiserate over the shameful necessity of taking up these jobs: “‘It’s hell these days, ain’t it,’ sad the man. ‘A poor man ain’t nowhere. You could starve, by Jesus, right in the street and there ain’t most no one would help you.’”³³⁵ Dreiser notes that Hurstwood, overhearing their laments, “felt a little superior to these two, a little better-off.”³³⁶ Even here, just a short time before he will sell off his remaining possessions and find himself homeless, Hurstwood fails to recognize his material circumstances. Yet, notably, the two other scabs articulate their political position, discussing their recent layoffs as the necessity driving their actions and express their wish to extend solidarity to the strikers if they could simply afford to not be so desperate themselves. This moment of mutuality, of conjointly recognizing that “a poor man ain’t nowhere” suggests the possibility that these two unnamed and

³³⁴ Though Kaplan claims that the “we do view the strike from the inside, its depiction, like the individual details in the text, has little effect on the narrative trajectory or the lives of the characters,” this seems to overlook the degree to which this moment signals the end of the line for Hurstwood in the laboring market, a significant attempt to hold onto a class position quickly slipping away. Similarly, the strike scene (which is more appropriately rendered as the scabbing scene) interrupts Hurstwood’s confidence in the security of capitalist arrangements, challenging his notion that the striking proletarians will assuredly be confidently toppled, a major blow to his view of capitalist social relations as by and large static. *Social Construction*, 155.

³³⁵ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 415.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*

unemployed characters occupy this nowhere together, that they share a position in this no-place in which they know that their woes reside within the system of capitalism itself. The claim that “a poor man ain’t nowhere” cuts two ways. It suggests that the unemployed, lumpenproletariat exists nowhere within the province of political economy and simultaneously carries the possibility of negation, that the poor *ain’t* nowhere precisely because the poor *are* everywhere. In this moment of ragged sociality, the possibilities of the riotocratic lurk and in one more moment of cruel comedy, Hurstwood simply ignores it. He cannot see how he too now stands nowhere alongside these nebulous figures.

Shortly thereafter though, we ever so briefly glimpse his realization that the pains of work exist inherent in the thing itself: “He swallowed and looked about, contemplating the dull, homely labor of the thing. It was disagreeable, miserably disagreeable, in all its phases. Not because he was better, but because it was hard. It would be hard to anyone, he thought.”³³⁷ That work is hard for everyone marks the dissent underlying the naturalism of Dreiser’s descent to the lower depths. We should not take this as a simple truism, but rather as the fundamental problem articulated within *Sister Carrie*, that the capitalist world wherein our dreams become so frequently delimited to the singular can never sound in the key of common liberation and that the utopian register resides elsewhere, barely glimpsable but still unextinguished. Though Walter Benn Michaels argues that “realism in *Sister Carrie* is the literature only of exhausted desire and economic failure,”³³⁸ this seems woefully incapable of accounting for that thread of realism running in the background over in Brooklyn, the

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 417.

³³⁸ Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 46.

realism Hurstwood encounters when he returns back to the rut of the rocking chair and encounters those reports of “Strike Spreading in Brooklyn” and “Rioting Breaks Out in All Parts of the City.”³³⁹ This realism, the realism which depicts a class moving against the conditions of their work in which “the work of waiting was not counted” in their wages³⁴⁰, a movement which bucks against the idleness forcibly imposed upon them by the company and the police, the idleness which is not born of their autonomous actions *against* the working day but rather robs them of the wage relation entirely, manifests not in “exhausted desire and economic failure” but in the *Sturm und Drang* which Hurstwood unknowingly walked into, in riots animated by the riotocratic whereupon “cars were assailed, men attacked, policemen struggled with, tracks torn up and shots fired, until at last street fights and mob movements became frequent, and the city was invested with militia.”³⁴¹ This realism only exists on the outside of the text’s primary narrative, tucked away in the background of Hurstwood’s own vantage as an avid reader of the newspaper who “didn’t sympathize with the corporations” but defeatedly and fatalistically contends that “strength was with them” alongside “property and public utility,” until this material reality threateningly rears its head to break fully into *Sister Carrie*.³⁴² Its arrival is a historical punctuation, elucidating another world of activity occurring off the main stage out there in the nebula, a discontent with the conditions of work which when taken collectively do not neatly mesh within the melodramatic and sentimental forms *Sister Carrie*’s narrative structure still relies upon. It is a realism Hurstwood retreats from, trudging back in the freezing cold to

³³⁹ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 429.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 409.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 421.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 410.

take refuge in the flat where he can rest with the knowledge that the work “would be hard to anyone” and thus sets the course not for proletarianization but for pauperization. As Gavin Jones argues, Dreiser’s “rhetoric of pauperism” directs the novel away from a structural depiction of class formation and towards the pauper “as a class for whom poverty becomes virtually an ontological condition, an innate factor of identity whose causes threaten to detach entirely from material considerations.”³⁴³ Yet, as much as this description holds true for the characterization of Hurstwood, it fails to hold for those two unemployed men who conclude that “a poor man ain’t nowhere,” thrown out of work and forced into the desperate position of strikebreaking despite their broader class sympathies. Their position is not portrayed in ontological terms but rather geographic ones, where without the bonds of wage labor, they are unlocatable within the provinces of political economy, *Gespenster* left to haunt the outsides and undersides of capital accumulation.

Michaels is correct, however, that “in *Sister Carrie*, satisfaction itself is never desirable; it is instead the sign of incipient failure, decay, and finally death.”³⁴⁴ Accumulation and growth ward off such stagnation. When Hurstwood returns from his foray into Brooklyn, Carrie’s detesting of Hurstwood’s inversion of accumulation and growth, of loss and decay, leads her to “g[e]t a taste of what it is to grow weary of the idler.”³⁴⁵ Yet Carrie too had occupied a similar position upon arriving in Chicago “a work-seeker, an outcast without employment,” someone who had had to make “that wearisome, baffled retreat which the

³⁴³ Gavin Jones, *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 86.

³⁴⁴ Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard*, 42.

³⁴⁵ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 430.

seeker for employment at nightfall too often makes.”³⁴⁶ In fact, it had been Carrie’s own idleness on the street outside her sister’s which “attracted the attention of an offensive but common sort.”³⁴⁷ Like Maggie, Carrie’s momentary stillness or absence of purpose carries the gendered reading of women’s idleness which the male passerby always takes for another form of unwaged work. For Carrie, aristocratic idleness is the epitome of desire for it cannot be mistaken as its ragged counterpart; thus, her idle hours remain in the private sphere, engaged in dreams of what wealth can bring. Though for Carrie, it is upon having employment itself that the contradictions heighten most. The “high-flown speculations” Carrie makes in the rocking chair are quickly shattered by the harsh realities of laboring for wages.³⁴⁸ Carrie’s conception of money as “something everybody else has and I must get,” what Dreiser calls “the old definition” and the “popular understanding, nothing more,” does not seem all too far removed from a run of the mill capitalist understanding in which money “was a power in itself”; however, the money she desires cannot be obtained through the low wages her labor brings.³⁴⁹ As she discovers that the labor pains her, that the repetitive, mechanical motions “became more and more distasteful until at last it was absolutely nauseating,”³⁵⁰ her idealization of what proletarian labor could bring becomes irrevocably punctured. Like Hurstwood after his foray into that labor which expends more energy than the money in return can ever replace, she realizes that there shall be no upward mobility

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

from here, only degeneration: “Her idea of work had been so entirely different.”³⁵¹ After Carrie becomes sick from exposure to the elements (lacking a jacket she still had not been able to afford) and once more enters the rungs of the unemployed and desperate cut off from the wage relation, she finally opts instead for the temporary dependency of living off Drouet and subsequently Hurstwood, a springboard away from the realm of “hard contract” into something more flexible and manipulatable, an escape from the world of toil.

In the last chapter of the University of Pennsylvania edition (which attempts to restore the text from editorial hand of Doubleday and return it to Dreiser’s original vision), Dreiser attempts a description of the lumpenproletariat, a typology of the class:

A study of these men in broad light proved them to be nearly all of a type. They belonged to the class that sits on the park benches during the endurable days and sleeps upon them during the summer nights. They frequent the Bowery and those down-at-the-hells Easy Side streets where poor clothes and shrunken features are not singled out as curious. They are the men who are in the lodging house sitting rooms during bleak and bitter weather and who swarm about the cheaper shelters which only open at six in a number of the lower East Side streets. Miserable food, ill-timed and greedily eaten, had played havoc with bone and muscle. They were all pale, flabby, sunken-eyed, hollow-chested, with eyes that glinted and shone, and lips that were a sickly red by contrast. Their hair was but half attended to, their ears anaemic in hue, and their shoes broken in leather and run down at heel and toe. They were of the class which simply floats and drifts, every wave of people washing upon one as breakers do driftwood upon a storm shore.³⁵²

These are the unemployed who have nightly for twenty years arrived at a caterer’s door at midnight to receive a loaf of bread: “In times of panic and unusual hardships, there were seldom more than three hundred. In times of prosperity, when little is heard of the unemployed, there were seldom less. The same number winter and summer, in storm or calm, in good times and bad, held this melancholy midnight rendezvous at Fleischmann’s

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 489.

bread box.”³⁵³ Dreiser insists on depicting this immiseration as multitudinous, refusing to allow the conditions of life outside the wage to ever read as spectacular; instead, he depicts its all too commonness. The omnipresence of this communion, its absolute, material necessity, remains consistent despite any narrativization of employment rates, this so-called surplus population a fixture inherent to capitalism rather than any aberration. If wage labor is intolerable, even more so is the excruciating work of no work, the laboring of wageless life on the peripheries. All the glamour of the windows of conspicuous commerce becomes now nothing more than an obscene display when resolutely viewed from this collective vantage of raggedness, of the flotsam and jetsam of a capitalist world-system which perpetually creates their condition of nigh total immiseration by disallowing them the means to reproduce to their own lives. The mutual aid of the bread box sounds harmoniously with Dreiser’s conviction that competitive individualism of the marketplace is no longer a “working social formula”; instead, this small moment harkens towards another possibility, an opening onto a sociality dislodged from the deadly logics of accumulation and growth, an anticipatory illumination of a laborless theory of value buried within naturalism’s scenic backdrop, a small commons for communion held around the bread box. Even so, this formulation still relies upon charity. Depicting the omnipresence of the class of nebulous figures as total dependents headed inevitably towards the culmination of their own private tragedies, defuses any possible route out of this cycle; this “class which simply floats and drifts” cannot be anything but a rebuke to the continued desire for a still unquenchable *more* evidenced in *Carrie*. They become merely an abstracted formal presence for the issuance of Dreiser’s

³⁵³ Ibid.

critique and little else. But even after Hurstwood has found there to be no use, the class itself remains, even “when little is heard of the unemployed.” Even if Dreiser can achieve no more integration of the collective into capitalist totality than as a spectral mass, they continue to haunt, even after the novel’s close.

Coda

In his 1896 piece “Zola as a Romantic Writer,” Frank Norris defines “the real Realism,” that kind found specifically in Howells’s novels, as preoccupied with characters who, like their reader, appear “well behaved and ordinary and bourgeois.” Norris argues that Howellsian realism is wholly devoid of the qualities of the romance, consisting instead of “the smaller details of every-day life, things that are likely to happen between lunch and supper, small passions, restricted emotions, dramas of the reception-room, tragedies of an afternoon call, crises involving cups of tea.” He quickly reminds, however, that this does not make Howellsian realism a failure. On the contrary, “the real Realism” “is the commonplace tale of commonplace made into a novel of far more than commonplace charm.”³⁵⁴ Norris defines this genre at the level of its characters and readership (only ever bourgeois), its scale (only ever muted and minor), and its plotting (only ever of the everyday). By contrast, he elevates the naturalist novel as a kind of extension of the romance which inverts its primary characters and dramatic focus. No longer centered around the aristocratic and noble, naturalist authors set their tales “among the lower—almost the lowest—classes; those who have been thrust or wrenched from the ranks, who are falling by the roadway” and is a

³⁵⁴ Frank Norris, “Zola as Romantic Writer,” in *Documents of American Realism and Naturalism*, ed. Donald Pizer (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), 168.

“drama, of the people, working itself out in blood and ordure.”³⁵⁵ Norris suggests here a genre distinction that maps onto a class distinction. If realism’s mimetic realm is the upper crust, naturalism’s is the ragged proletariat.

Leaving aside the fact that Norris’s own naturalist novels hardly meet this standard, themselves primarily focused upon the dramas of (petty) bourgeois *déclassement*, the most intriguing element of Norris’s definition arises from the notion that the two genres have their most extreme opposition in *who* they can respectively incorporate as their cast of characters and *what* those characters then do within the novel. The social worlds in either case remain separate and distinct, incapable of overlapping and intersecting and formally cordoned off from one another. That “the lower—almost the lowest—classes” can only enter the naturalist novel in order to “be twisted from the ordinary, wrenched out from the quiet, uneventful round of ever-day life, and flung into the throes of a vast and terrible drama that works itself out in unleashed passions, in blood, and in sudden death” means that these classes have nothing of interest which may occur “between lunch and supper.”³⁵⁶ In Norris’s naturalism, it is simply not enough that the poorest already suffer under the yoke of capital for that itself is much too commonplace to be spectacular; instead, the novelist must undertake to increase the ways in which they hurt. Above all, neither “the real Realism” nor the inverted romance of naturalism would seem capable of successfully depicting Lukács’s “deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society” for it is this matrix of totality which Norris’s definition denies above all.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

As this chapter has attempted to demonstrate, however, the divide between Howellsian realism and the naturalism of Crane and Dreiser does not mark an inseparable gulf in the manner that Norris's essay proclaims even as the gaps in the portrayal of capitalist totality he points us towards do in fact feature prominently in these novels. These American novels at the fin de siècle share an undergirding lattice, an overt preoccupation with déclasserment, work, money, idleness, hunger, and a consistent through line of extreme class tension threatening to explode. They also contain a perpetual engagement with the utopian, attempting by way of critique to present a social world which could imminently be otherwise.³⁵⁷ Yet attached to the bourgeois form of the novel, they do not (and perhaps cannot) follow through on this explosive quality. As Ernst Bloch says, Marx "sees more than just misery, unlike all the abstract sympathizers and especially the abstract utopians. For him, the explosive factor in poverty really becomes a dynamic, explosive force, directed against the cause of that misery, which once it realizes its causes, itself becomes the lever of revolution."³⁵⁸ It remains, however, this tenuous balance of utopian undercurrents, anti-capitalist critique, and the miseries of poverty which provide these novels with their unique capacity to incorporate so many nebulous figures thrown out of the wage relation into the text. And once there, they rarely know just how to resolve the material conditions which necessitate their continual (re)production. In this uncertainty and hesitancy, we glimpse

³⁵⁷ As Thomas Peyser has it: "Realism and utopia both therefore might be grouped under the sign of critique, insofar as both aim to displace social arrangements by revealing their self-contradictions and genealogy. Consequently, both modes are also essentially oriented toward the future, as their attacks on the existent are—usually, in any case—motivated by a desire for change rather than by a purposeless, deconstructive glee. Their passion for destruction, we might say, is also a progressive passion." *Utopia and Cosmopolis: Globalization in the Era of American Literary Realism* (Durham: Duke UP), 1998, 10.

³⁵⁸ Ernst Bloch, "Karl Marx and Humanity: The Material of Hope," in *On Karl Marx*, trans. John Maxwell (London: Verso, 2018), 21.

those entryways onto the riotocratic, those communistic and anarchistic assertions that the very social order itself, rooted as it is upon the value form, must be abolished in order for any end to this state of affairs to be reached. This is why, as Kaplan reminds us, the realist novel has such notorious struggles with reaching a conclusion: “Realistic novels have trouble ending because they pose problems they cannot solve, problems that stem from their attempt to imagine and contain social change. In fact, the very premises that make the problems visible and available to representation make their resolution impossible in the narratives.”³⁵⁹ That “explosive factor in poverty” can only manifest as anticipation or desire rather than as historical resolution.

Writing in 1938, Bertolt Brecht offers up a rejoinder to the Lukácsian theory of realism which capaciously attempts to reorient what realism *is* and what it can *achieve*. In “Popularity and Realism,” written to be published in *Das Wort* but going unpublished until 1967, Brecht states that “the people can only take over their cultural heritage by an act of expropriation.”³⁶⁰ The collective, proletarian “concept of realism must be and wide and political, sovereign over all conventions,” it must necessarily be a mode which is useful towards liberation.³⁶¹ Brecht’s realism is a genre in motion, always shifting and changing in response to historical conditions, always a contested site from which what can be looted and smuggled out and made over in the behest of the communistic should be taken up and all that cannot resigned to the dustbin of history. For Brecht, the bourgeois realist novel “bears the stamp of the way it was employed, when and by which class, down to its smallest

³⁵⁹ Kaplan, *Social Construction*, 160.

³⁶⁰ Bertolt Brecht, “Popularity and Realism.,” trans. Stuart Hood, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. ed. Ronald Taylor (London: NLB, 1977), 81.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

details.”³⁶² There is nothing internal to the genre which makes it exceptional for mimetically rendering the objective conditions of life within capitalism; instead, he advocates for the deployment of all that aesthetic expression which is realistic:

Realistic means: discovering the causal complexes of society / unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power / writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up / emphasizing the element of development / making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it.³⁶³

The realistic stands apart from realism in that it refuses to reify one particular genre as more suited towards a depiction of capitalist totality. Rather, Brecht’s “realistic” advocates on behalf of whatever aesthetic means can reveal the conditions of our mutual oppressions and miseries and creates expressly against it. I contend that the riotocratic mode marks “the standpoint of the class which emphasiz[es] the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up” in that this movement marks a struggle against the wage and the value form and tends towards its abolition, and its through the realist novels at the fin de siècle that we get glimpses of this realistic necessity. In the next chapter, I turn to the genres of philosophy, (photo)journalism, painting, and film, as sites wherein this realistic tendency finds itself similarly articulated (and inevitably fragmentary).

³⁶² Ibid., 81.

³⁶³ Ibid., 82.

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Chapter IV

“This Tramp and Vagrant World”: Seeing the Nebula

“How fur ye goin’?”
“I dunno....Pretty far.”
—John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer*

I’m a goin’ to stay where you sleep all day
Where they hung the jerk that invented work
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains
—Harry McClintock, “The Big Rock Candy Mountains”

In those 1906-7 lectures in which he lays out “a new name for some old ways of thinking,” William James outlines the pragmatic method as that which can intervene in the humdrum of everyday events both major and minor, a method rooted in the real quandaries and queries one encounters between breakfast and bed. The rationalism/idealism which focuses upon the far-flung abstractions of absolutes crashing about always above our heads, which has little meaning for the pragmatist lest “one “be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other’s being right.”³⁶⁴ James’s pragmatic method embraces a radical empiricism of process, of an “attitude of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things fruits, consequences, facts.”³⁶⁵ His philosophical system turns itself fully towards “this real world of sweat and dirt”³⁶⁶ and holds that “all our theories are *instrumental*, are mental modes of *adaptation* to reality.”³⁶⁷ Within “the rich thicket of reality,”³⁶⁸ the radical empiricism of the

³⁶⁴ William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, in *Writings 1902-19010*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: The Library of America, 1987), 506.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 510.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 518.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 571.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 517.

pragmatist allows truth to “become a class-name for all sorts of definite working-values in experience” rather than a permanent fixture of eternity.³⁶⁹ In its emphasis upon process and adaptability, concretization and hard fact, James’s pragmatism can appear to rhyme with the materialism of Marx: “Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.”³⁷⁰ Marx’s famed insistence on standing the dialectical method back on its feet “in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell” insists upon a theoretical instrumentality which “regards every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspect as well.”³⁷¹ What then might James’s insistence upon attempting “to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences”³⁷² and Marx’s reminder that “all social life is essentially *practical*” methodologically share?³⁷³ Is there any *practical* use for us to consider the utilization of both methods as a means of interpreting “the rich thicket of reality”?

In the last chapter, I demonstrated the ways in which the riotocratic aspirations and actions burst onto the scene and just as often fall back through the representational cracks in the American realist novel at the *fin de siècle*. This chapter will look to tease out how a number of other formal modes of representation of the nineteenth and early twentieth century attempted to depict the realms of nebulous figures, of the lives of the impoverished outside

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 516.

³⁷⁰ Karl Marx, “Concerning Feuerbach,” in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1992), 422.

³⁷¹ Karl Marx, “Postface to the Second Edition,” in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 103.

³⁷² James, *Pragmatism*, 506.

³⁷³ Karl Marx, “Concerning Feuerbach,” 423.

of the wage relation and beyond the workplace. Here too, we will attempt to determine the ways in which nebulous figures come to signal differing modalities of looking, of ways of seeing the material conditions of capitalism. Turning first to the pragmatist manifesto issued in the lectures of William James, I present an interpretation of his rhetoric therein which suggests a reading of James's pragmatism as highly enmeshed in a thinking about social inequality. Then I take up two distinct modes of social reportage, separated by forty years, to examine the changing conditions of what it means to know the city by knowing its nebulous figures. While the journalism of George Foster claims to expose the vice and squalor of the other side, his work often adds a sensationalist desire to the riotous living of the urban poor. Contrastingly, Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*, published four decades later, addresses similar questions but with vastly different methods and ends, attempting to cast a Progressive Era set of values of social scientific solutions to the problem of the so-called dangerous classes. In the concluding section, the chapter moves to an analysis of how the Ashcan School's paintings of the shared condition of ragged life demonstrate a visual strategy which neither seeks to expose nor demystify the nebula. Finally, I look to the films of *The Little Tramp* to sketch something of an end to this particular cultural era of the riotocracy, a final bow in the pioneering cinematic works of Charlie Chaplin. Throughout, we see how these genres continually posit a connection between "the rich thicket of reality" and those figures who occupy its densest outskirts outside of the realm of wage labor.

"Out of Each Word Its Practical Cash-Value"

Ernst Bloch argues that the bastions of American bourgeois thought hold an especially vehement view of Marxist thought: "Among the reactionaries of America, Marx,

the emancipator of the weary and the heavy-laden, is regarded as a near-criminal—an opinion which not even the German reactionaries would share.”³⁷⁴ In discussing Marx’s development of the theory-practice relation (citing that oft invoked eleventh thesis on Feuerbach),³⁷⁵ Bloch dismisses outright any relationship between pragmatism and Marxism: “

It would be equally erroneous to regard Marxism as related to bourgeois American pragmatism, which holds that the truth value of any knowledge is to be measured by its success—which brings profit and common utility—and that any truth apart from this bourgeois type oriented to profitability is impossible and senseless. This may be true in a country where everybody is a salesman, a seller of himself, but surely *this* kind of ‘theory-practice’ is useless for us.³⁷⁶

Bloch quite clearly states that the resonances between the two forms are only superficial, that pragmatism is nothing less than an orientation towards a bourgeois conception of truth as that which brings a success marked by profit. This understanding appears, however, as necessarily rooted in the metaphoric register James’s lectures deploy which often takes up the language of the economic. For instance, when James writes of the pragmatic method of breaking down idealist conceptions resting in the “magic” mystification of words holding up metaphysical edifices, he states: “You must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience. It appears less as a solution, then, than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be *changed*.”³⁷⁷ The “cash-value” here does not seem so much rooted in a sense that one should attempt to probe a concept and leave with whatever meaning brings

³⁷⁴ Ernst Bloch, “The University, Marxism, and Philosophy,” in *On Karl Marx*, trans. John Maxwell (London: Verso, 2018), 118.

³⁷⁵ “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it.” Karl Marx, “Concerning Feuerbach,” 423.

³⁷⁶ Ernst Bloch, “The University, Marxism, and Philosophy,” 131.

³⁷⁷ William James, *Pragmatism*, 509.

the most tangible benefit away but rather that one should apply a meaning to the “stream of [their] experience” in daily life and determine its worth by testing it in practice and developing it further. This application suggests a utilization of a “theory-practice” which appears to test theory in the social world of daily life as one encounters it while simultaneously embracing the possibility that reality itself is capable of continual change. I would contend that James’s pragmatism here holds for the “revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things,” that communism’s “cash-value” in fact arises from the experience of struggling for it, of moving towards it, and of participating in the social struggle on behalf of it in a manner which adapts to historical fluidity discovered and tested practically in the “stream of experience.”³⁷⁸ This is not to argue that those 1906-7 lectures are in fact concealing a revolutionary content in and of themselves (they are not) but rather to suggest that perhaps the “near-criminal[ization]” of Marx in America invoked by Bloch has in fact led him to assume a necessarily reactionary function of James that is equally mistaken. What if we instead began from a different starting place, of taking James at his word that his system is in fact a method for making sense of “this real world of sweat and dirt,” a method for disentangling seeming contradiction in order to adopt a way of knowing the world which embraces the disunified and the fragmentary, which is not a means for the self-justification for “a country where everybody is a salesman, a seller of himself” but rather an opening onto a critique of this very set of conditions?

Let us start then with our eyes attuned to a different James, one who does not espouse a particular political line but rather holds a position *towards* the political which is

³⁷⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Political Writings* (London: Verso, 2019), 92.

oriented towards the tangible, material conflicts of American life in the early twentieth century. Take for instance the long quotation in *Pragmatism* from “that valiant anarchistic writer Morrison I. Swift” whose “anarchism goes a little farther than mine does, but I confess that I sympathize a good deal, and some of you, I know, will sympathize heartily with his dissatisfaction with the idealistic optimisms now in vogue.”³⁷⁹ As Deborah J. Coon reminds us:

To James’s contemporaries the allusion to Swift was richly packed with meaning, for his name had been common newspaper fare for more than a decade. Swift was an American writer and radical organizer of the nation’s unemployed, achieving notoriety during the depression of the 1890s by organizing marches of the unemployed in Boston and, in 1894, to Washington.³⁸⁰

The portion of Swift quoted by James involves his example of a laid off worker who after trudging about the snow-covered city could not secure employment to provide for his soon to be evicted family whereupon this unemployed man commits suicide. The passage from Swift argues that the poor who *know* reality through their experience are better suited to pass judgement on what constitutes the state of things than a bourgeois philosopher detached from the conditions of the masses. Coon argues that James’s invocation of Swift marked the culmination of the mutual development of James’s growing attractions to both anti-imperialism and communitarian anarchism.³⁸¹ Thus when in his seventh lecture James argues that the “rationalist mind, radically taken, is of a doctrinaire and authoritative complexion” while the “radical pragmatist on the other hand is a happy-go-lucky anarchistic sort of creature” content with embracing the looseness and plurality of the universe, the rhetorical

³⁷⁹ William James, *Pragmatism*, 498.

³⁸⁰ Deborah J. Coon, “‘One Moment in the World’s Salvation’: Anarchism and the Radicalization of William James,” *The Journal of American History* 83, no.1 (June 1996): 70.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

choice to posit his method as a sort of anti-authoritarian anarchism appears especially noteworthy.³⁸² Alexander Livingston suggests we see James not as advocating for a political anarchism but rather framing pragmatism as “an anti-intellectualist attitude of orientation”³⁸³ which seeks to move against the growing consolidation of large forces of imperialist state power:

...James’s anti-authoritarianism is an intervention into the very *craving for authority* at the core of empire as a way of life. The craving for authority, a hunger James analyzes most deeply in his discussions of monism, drives philosophers and lay people alike to affirm patterns of thinking and practices of perception that impose order on experience, disavow complexity and difference, and engender hostile and dogmatic reactions to perceived threats to this fantastic order.³⁸⁴

This anarchist pragmatist, neither a bomb thrower of the insurrectionary variety nor an organizer of the syndicalist type, appears more of an anti-systemic refuser and refuter of all those systems which coerce and crush the ways of knowing and ways of being which do not fit neatly within a totalizing order. Shortly after James describes his imagined pragmatist as an anarchist, he further fleshes out this imagining by invoking a metaphor of property: “For pluralistic pragmatism, truth grows up inside of all the finite experiences. They lean on each other, but the whole of them, if such a whole there be, leans on nothing. All ‘homes’ are in finite experience; finite experience as such is homeless. Nothing outside of the flux secures the issue of it.” He claims that rationalists necessarily will assuredly think that “this describes a tramp and vagrant world” but that the pragmatist embraces this partiality, multiplicity, and

³⁸² William James, *Pragmatism*, 600.

³⁸³ Alexander Livingston, *Damn Great Empires!: William James and the Politics of Pragmatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 10.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

unfixedness.³⁸⁵ James's descriptive language for his method serves by and large to contextualize the material conditions and contradictions of a capitalist economy which produces the unemployed, the desperate, the evicted, anarchists, tramps, and vagrants.

What then does this rhetoric indicate to us about pragmatism as an empirical method and epistemological position? At the very least, it shifts the meaning of James's commercial language as the "cash-value" one acquires in a "tramp and vagrant world" is that practical orientation which keeps one nourished and surviving. It marks the site of being oriented towards the reality of our material conditions, no longer content sheltering within the illusory home of the ideological, the ideal, and the transhistorical. This "tramp and vagrant world" signals a careful and consistent attention to the ever-present immanence of historical motion and change contained within the present state of things, a knowledge that we as individual humans "are tangent to the wider life of things."³⁸⁶ James emphasizes this point in his remarks on "aesthetic union" in which he claims that totality in the singular remains an impossibility:

Things tell a story. Their parts hang together so as to work out a climax. They play into each other's hands expressively. Retrospectively, we can see that altho no definite purpose presided over a chain of events, yet the events fell into a dramatic form, with a start, a middle, and a finish. In point of fact all stories end; and here again taking the point of view of a many is the more natural one to take. The world is full of partial stories that run parallel to one another, beginning and ending at odd times. They mutually interlace and interfere at points, but we can not unify them completely in our minds.³⁸⁷

This argument on behalf of "partial stories that run parallel to one another" which "interlace and interfere at points" but do not cohere altogether is key to the anarchistic character of

³⁸⁵ William James, *Pragmatism*, 601.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 619.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 548.

James's pragmatism even as it is precisely here that we find its limits, the outer edges of its own "cash-value" for emancipatory politics—an absence of a theory of history, reality, and selfhood as socially *(re)produced*. Capitalism as a world-system much like its antithesis in the communist movement is still a totality despite the conflicts and gaps riven within it, a tangle of both spectral appearances and material processes which give rise to particular experiences within a general form. Which takes us back to Bloch, who goes on to argue: And Marxism also reveals totality again—which is the method and the subject matter of all authentic philosophy. But for the first time this totality appears not as a *static*, as a *finished principle* of the whole, but rather as a *utopian*, or more precisely, as a *concrete utopian* totality, as the *process latency of a still unfinished world*.³⁸⁸ Jamesian pragmatism can only set about turning us towards the possibility of seeing this "tramp and vagrant world" as one unmoored from anything like a unified telos and rather consisting of conflicting tendencies, bucking against the trend of authoritarianism both intellectual and political, yet it cannot arrive at any vision of this "concrete utopian totality" which Marx's analysis opens up to us. What Bloch's diagnosis of pragmatism gets wrong is that the proletariat is in fact a seller of themselves under capitalism by necessity, and pragmatism can take us no further than steering us towards a recognition of this state of things and its malleability. James's method does not seem alert to the fact that the only way in which this reality changes is through the same route in which it is made, as a social and collective endeavor distinct from mere individual positionings; however, through James's method, we can see the cash-value of the communistic lies in its fundamentally collective sense of the world, its ability to fundamentally unite a narrative "of partial stories

³⁸⁸ Ernst Bloch, "The University, Marxism, and Philosophy," 136.

that run parallel to one another, beginning and ending at odd times” into a sum greater than the parts found via abolition that practically and pragmatically overcomes the condition of alienation, disconnection, fragmentation, and separation James describes as common to our experience within “the rick thicket of reality.” A “tramp and vagrant world” which necessarily produces so-called tramps and vagrants as a condition of its ongoingness produces the very conditions and social formations which can collectively create the world differently, the most pragmatic of contentions in that we can “show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other’s being right.”³⁸⁹

“The Under-Ground Story”

Within those lectures which make up *Pragmatism*, we find a rhetoric suffused with those nebulous figures unseen and unthought who haunt bourgeois political economy. They serve the function within James’s method of standing in as harbingers of the real, as an extant set of lives which have been equally made invisible by the dominant strands of bourgeois philosophy. We do not find these figures as more than signposts guiding us towards “this real world of sweat and dirt.” They appear only in outline, incapable themselves of philosophizing, objects for the contemplation of the audience. But what then of the genre of the journalistic, that form which seeks to inform a readership by way of an exposition of the minutiae of reality, which ostensibly seeks to fill in those hazy outlines with detail and dimension? How do nebulous figures make their appearance and are we able to glimpse something like the riotocratic in an attempt to reflect reality as a piece of reporting? In order to provide a provisional answer to this question, I would like to look to two

³⁸⁹ William James, *Pragmatism*, 506.

separate subgenres of the journalistic in two different historical moments as an exemplary of two distinct methods, two ways of knowing each possessing a distinct “cash-value” for what they can provide to an inquiry into anti-work desire and action. Rather than take the broad archive of the journalistic which encompasses innumerable items for perusal which most certainly tell us something in detail about those on the outsides or undersides of the wage relation, I intend to look at two works which are compendiums of sorts, attempts to make sense of the poverty of a single place (in this instance New York City) and to detail the ins and outs of the everyday by virtue of a longform exposé. Within these two texts and their respective strategies of performing a laying bare of reality, we can discern competing modalities of representation. George G. Foster’s 1850 collection of urban sketches collected in *New York by Gas-Light: With Here and There a Streak of Sunshine* positions itself as a revelation of a mystery, spinning out narratives of adventure in the haunts of the motley proletariat; forty years later, Jacob Riis’s 1890 collection *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* attempts to reveal through objective documentation, employing photojournalism as a means of capturing a problematic proletariat in need of intervention from the state, a contingent of lives so bare there can be no mystery at all.

In his masterful study on the technics of lighting and its intertwinement with capitalist development, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century*, Wolfgang Schivelbusch reminds us that “modern gas lighting began as industrial lighting.”³⁹⁰ The technology was deeply intertwined with coal mining, embedded in the development of

³⁹⁰ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995), 16.

what Lewis Mumford calls “carboniferous capitalism,”³⁹¹ that mode of capitalist production indebted to the violent logic of underground extraction: “Mine: blast: dump: crush: extract: exhaust...”³⁹² Schivelbusch contends that the invasiveness of the gaslight brought the world of capital further into the home, an invasion which struck at the center of domestic life, removing a central autonomy: “When the household lost its hearth fire, it lost what since time immemorial had been the focus of its life.”³⁹³ The prevalence of the gaslight not only brought the network of carboniferous capitalism into the workplace and then the home, it ushered in a new way of seeing in the night’s public sphere, bringing with it a new regime of state discipline and consolidation over riotous behavior in the streets. As Schivelbusch demonstrates, in France of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, “lantern smashing...became a collective, plebeian movement” in periods of revolt.³⁹⁴ This destruction of the street lamp “offered the additional satisfaction of symbolically unseating the authority they represented : the darkness that prevailed after the lanterns had gone out stood for disorder and freedom.”³⁹⁵ With the introduction of the gaslight, however, no longer could a rowdy individual or rebellious crowd deploy the act of lantern smashing to the same effect of enshrouding themselves in a natural darkness away from the ever watchful eyes of the state for the gaslight signals the consolidation of industrial power:

The oil lantern was perceived to a certain extent as something individual, whose light could also be extinguished individually. Meting out the same treatment to one of the

³⁹¹ Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 158.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 74. For more on the connection between Mumford’s critique of “carboniferous capitalism” and its relevance for a theory of anti-work politics in our present moment, see Clinton Williamson, “‘The Whole of Life Must Look Like a Job’: *Minima Moralia* and the Capitalocene,” in *Adorno’s ‘Minima Moralia’ in the 21st Century: Fascism, Work, and Ecology*, ed. Caren Irr (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

³⁹³ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night*, 28.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

new gaslights would have been a quixotic act, for each of these was merely an offshoot of the true centre, the far distant gas-works. A new way of putting out the light, appropriate to the new technology, had to aim at shutting down the gas-works.³⁹⁶

Not only a power measured perceptually via sight aided with a stronger light, but a symbolic power of the entrenched growth of industrialization, of carboniferous capitalism, the gaslight heralded a technics requiring an intervention by an ever more consolidated mass of proletarians to combat it. The age of the gaslight comes to appear like something of a prelude for the specter of the communistic, for the necessity of revolutionary imaginaries to themselves grow and expand collectively since the point of production had become a more dominant force in everyday life. The tendrils of the gas-works waged a war against the commons of the night and its illumination marked a new terrain of enclosure in which even the time of dreaming would be increasingly infringed upon and made over into a time of production.

In 1850's *New York by Gas-Light*, a follow-up to his 1849 collection of urban vignettes, *New York in Slices: By an Experienced Carver*, George G. Foster utilizes the gaslight as a symbol of only partial revelation. Yes the gas light exposes the collective activity of the streets to a network of surveillance but in Foster's formulation it also creates the conditions for an alternative network to form in the urban landscape, a world of subterranean activity made possible by this extension of light into the nighttime hours. Even as the gaslight begets an ordering function so too does it produce new collective activities which manifest as novel modes of illicit disorder. Foster opens his series of reports with a statement of purpose, a declaration of what these sketches hope to do:

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 112.

NEW YORK BY GAS-LIGHT! What a task we have undertaken! To penetrate beneath the thick veil of night and lay bare the fearful mysteries of darkness in the metropolis—the festivities of prostitution, the orgies of pauperism, the haunts of theft and murder, the scenes of drunkenness and beastly debauch, and all the sad realities that go to make up the lower stratum—the under-ground story—of life in New York! What may have been our motive for invading these dismal realms and thus wrenching from them their terrible secrets? Go on with us, and see. The duty of the present age is to discover the real facts of the actual condition of the wicked and wretched classes—so that Philanthropy and Justice may plant their blows aright. In our own humble way we profess to seek for and depict the truth. Let it speak for itself.³⁹⁷

Foster joins himself with the reader as a mutual participant in this work of revelation, an act of penetrating “the thick veil of night.” The gaslight then only sets the stage, provides the atmospheric lighting, by which the further recesses of the city still continually conceal from those on the outside of these social worlds. The reader has the thrill of joining Foster the journalist (whose forays into the city’s lower depths had roots in his work for Horace Greeley’s *Tribune*) as he “lay[s] bare the fearful mysteries of darkness in the metropolis,” which commence coterminous with the gaslight’s illuminations of “all the sad realities” of life among the lower classes. That this world above all holds “mysteries of darkness” tells us not only of the limits of the gaslight to expose but also the hiddenness of this alternative social life, a realm distinct from the reader’s own which is fundamentally unknown. Foster’s collection posits itself as a mediating force capable of taking us amongst the machinations of “the lower stratum—the under-ground story—of life in New York.” This class as described by Foster is one almost entirely composed of nebulous figures, described repeatedly as a class just out of view, hidden, secretive, mysterious, unknowable *sans* a Virgil figure to guide one through the inferno. In Dominique Kalifa’s *Vice, Crime, and Poverty: How the Western*

³⁹⁷ George G. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light and Other Urban Sketches*, ed. Stuart M. Blumin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 69.

Imagination Invented the Underworld, he argues that the cultural image of the bas-fonds as a commingling of a spatial metaphor with a descriptor of a particular class came into the cultural lexicon during this nineteenth-century moment: “Most of the puzzle pieces existed previously, but something happened during this century that assembled them in a coherent fashion, gave them a name, and hence an identity and a visibility.”³⁹⁸ In Foster’s introductory paragraph, we can witness for ourselves this attempted making over of nebulous figures into a culturally legible assemblage which can be identified; thus, the lure of the nebula’s mystery which even under gaslight still seems a spectral and formless presence is precisely that it will be given shape and detail in these pages as Foster takes us through “the festivities of prostitution, the orgies of pauperism, the haunts of theft and murder, the scenes of drunkenness and beastly debauch” which make up a newly sensible reality. “The real facts and wretched condition of the wicked and wretched classes” have to be revealed in their activity in order to bolster the surveillance of the gaslight with the policing mechanisms of judicial systems and charitable schemes. The truth that Foster proclaims this text will make known, that lived reality of a newly assembled class of “the wicked and wretched,” will supposedly “speak for itself.” But what exactly do we hear from this ragged contingent in Foster?

Most immediately noticeable in Foster’s writing is his penchant for literary flair in imaginative scene setting. This quality leads his work to appear less as descriptive of particular events which he sets down with dutiful accuracy and more as florid forays into the general, portraying types of events and scenarios which are meant to hold as broad stand-ins

³⁹⁸ Dominique Kalifa, *Vice, Crime, and Poverty: How the Western Imagination Invented the Underworld*, trans. Susan Emanuel (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 3.

for the overall atmosphere. Foster's mimesis then tends towards the composite image, an amalgamation of events and characters as one *may* find at any given place or time more so than any attempt to represent the singular, fine-grained event as analogically standing in for the whole. Take his portrait of the clientele of the typical oyster-cellar and its private room for example:

The women of course are all of one kind—but among the men, you would find, if you looked curiously, reverend judges and juvenile delinquents, pious and devout hypocrites, and undisguised libertines and debauchees. Gamblers and fancy men, high-flyers and spoonies, genteel pick-pockets and burglars, even, sometimes mingle in the detestable orgies of these detestable caverns; and the shivering policeman who crawls sleepily by at the dead of night, and mechanically raps his bludgeon upon the pavement as he hears the boisterous mirth below, may be reminding a grave functionary of the city that it is time to go home to his wife and children after the discharge of his “arduous public duties.”³⁹⁹

Foster depicts this scene as speculative medley, one which could plausibly exist “sometimes.” What appears more remarkable than the form, however, is the content, a listing of *who* we can expect to find in this motley crowd. This cohort of the private room of the oyster-cellar consists across class lines, sex workers alongside politicians, judges milling about with thieves. Foster's imagining shows us less of the distinction of the subterranean as a specific underclass than of a social milieu of contagion, one in which the supposedly venerable figures of authority appear especially singled out as acting contradictory to their pretense of being the authors of order. The mystery we find concealed here has been the private life of public figures more so than the riotocratic plottings of the criminalized classes. This marks a key site of the critique Foster develops throughout his portrait of nightlife in New York, one in which an ostensible examination of the “classes of obscure individuals,

³⁹⁹ George G. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light*, 73-4.

important only from their extent and the illegal subversive character of their lives and actions”⁴⁰⁰ often becomes an examination of how the elite participate within and perpetuate the vice ongoing in the city’s underbelly.⁴⁰¹

Foster’s journey by gaslight takes up those living against the wage contract most often as a heterogeneous crowd resistant to totalizing characterization. When he discusses the women of the *tableaux vivants* who “expose themselves to public gaze for a few dollars a week,” notes two types who present themselves in the court records: “. . .the models themselves have either stepped from the brothel to the public stage, or are young women from the country, destitute of home, friends and work, and compelled to adopt this repulsive and abhorrent profession, merely for the purpose of procuring bread.” Though he proclaims the women who utilize this field as an adjunct to sex work to be beyond redemption, he asks the reader to ponder “who can forbear a sentiment of keenest pity for those innocent and ignorant girls whom the hard fate and ill reward of woman’s labor have driven to such dire straits.”⁴⁰² This moralizing dichotomy, however, does not hold for long for in the chapter he devotes to “telling the actual truth about prostitution, in all its phases,” he sketches out two autobiographies with women in the sex work field meant to typify the trajectories into the realm outside the wage contract.⁴⁰³ The first follows a seduction narrative by which a young, innocent girl of the country finds herself taken advantage of by her cousin and minister. The

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 113.

⁴⁰¹ We see Foster demonstrate this critique to great effect in the eighth section of *New York by Gas-Light* on “The Ice-Creameries” where the setting reverses to the daytime hours, and we see a panorama of extramarital affairs among the city’s upper class. Narrated throughout as an ironic reprieve from the shocking and scandalous behavior of the lower depths, Foster herein demonstrates that if one looks closely enough, the appearance of wealth masks just as easily as the darkness of the midnight hour.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 82.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 92.

second, rejects the typical of the narrative of the fall and depicts sex work as a rise (albeit, a compromised one) from a young girl who began as a street sweeping beggar in dire poverty and abandoned her poor but loving family to “live freely and generously” within her new profession. Though Foster portrays this woman as addicted to drink, he also has her proclaim that “when I remember the squalid, loathsome, suffocating home of my childhood, and contrast my condition then with what it is now, I feel as if I ought to be pretty well satisfied with the way I have managed to get on in the world.” Though this woman stands in for the perils of the alcohol she has imbibed for spiritual comfort from a young age, Foster demonstrates the harsh, material conditions of poverty as a rational reason to seek more comfortable and reliable economic circumstances elsewhere. Because all the narratives of entry into sex work “soon degenerate to the merest commonplace of want, starvation, seduction and abandonment,” he directs the reader towards a critique of “all men who are guilty of seduction or libertinism, or who have trifled with the sacred affection of woman, in any form,” arguing that only if these ramifications of patriarchal power relations are addressed “nine-tenths of all crime and suffering will be at once abolished from the face of the earth.”⁴⁰⁴ In Foster’s rendition, sex work time and again becomes the center around which other nebulous figures orbit; however, despite his tendency to place blame for the vices of the urban poor upon their mirroring of the corrupt hypocrisies of the city’s powerful and elite, he ends up ultimately championing a native born, honestly sweating working class as the model for moral uprightness and American character (typified herein by the “b’hoy and the g’hal—the most original and interesting phase of human nature yet

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 103.

developed by American society and civilization”).⁴⁰⁵ The limits of the political theory found in *New York by Gas-Light* appear as merely a rearranged moralism, one that despite being capable of issuing scathing criticism of the city’s elite, often ends up longing for merely the propagation of an orderly, white, American working class to come into their own as a politically powerful grouping, a steadfast clinging to the possibility of an empowered producerism which ignores the degree to which the social conditions of New York he has drawn for the reader are direct results of an ever enclosing wage labor form which has intensified via capital consolidation in industrialization.

Even amidst these theoretical limits, *New York by Gas-Light* still provides glimmering glimpses of riotocratic forms. Foster depicts the rowdy bars of the Five Points as populated by “sailors, negroes and the worst of loafers and vagabonds”⁴⁰⁶ as well as “thieves, burglars, low gamblers and vagabonds in general, who haunt these quarters, and whose ‘pals’ are upstairs carrying on the game of prostitution.”⁴⁰⁷ These specters who haunt the night in the Five Points appear in Foster’s text as the of complete urban degradation, the source of great commerce to the numerous fences by their thefts and oft tricking the guileless visitor with counterfeit money or rigged games of chance. In “Cow Bay,” he recounts how the black population who populates it and “associate upon at least equal terms with the men and women of the parish” have engaged in two scenes of “absolute riot” against the police.⁴⁰⁸ Here among the Five Points, Foster’s sympathies seem to all but disappear because so too has any trace of his ideal type of the white, native-born artisan; instead, we find a site of

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 177.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 122.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 123.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 125.

multiracial *Gespenster* outside the bonds of the wage contract, living a collective social life in streets and cellar bars which appears outside the juridically enforced norms of the rest of the city. Unsurprisingly, it is in the center of the Five Points where Foster notes the presence of a “large gas-lamp, which throws a strong light for some distance around, over the scene where once complete darkness furnished almost absolute security and escape to the pursued thief and felon, familiar with every step and knowing the exists and entrances to every house.” The new gaslight remains permanently lit and constantly affixed with a cop who “stands ever sentinel to see that it is not extinguished.”⁴⁰⁹ This gaslight possesses the singular function of surveillance, tied directly to the policing function which stands beside it as an embodied manifestation of its symbolic power which desires not to reveal the mystery of the city but to stamp it out, to make urban life seen, known, and ordered, a stage light for “the constant police wars being fought against the disorderly, unruly, criminal, indecent, disobedient, disloyal, and lawless.”⁴¹⁰ Yet this sketch of the combat between the unwaged and criminalized forces of the night and the policing mechanisms of the state attempting to instill the discipline appropriate to a hierarchical property order is not the singular place we see a micro-struggle against the strictures of wage labor. We witness it too in Foster’s continual attention to the amusement and joys of the proletarian public sphere, most markedly in the shared temporality of the night off:

Saturday night is—if our emerald-colored friends will excuse the bull—the poor man’s holiday. During the rest of the week every one is engaged earnestly at his or her regular occupation—the mechanic at his bench, the laborer with his hod, the rag-picker with hook and bag, the beggar at his corner. Even the children of the poor are

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁴¹⁰ Mark Neocleous, *A Critical Theory of Police Power: The Fabrication of Social Order* (London: Verso, 2021), 5.

hard workers, notwithstanding their apparently riotous idleness...But Saturday night is poverty's saturnalia.⁴¹¹

In this formulation, we witness a combination of the waged and unwaged, of the mechanic and laborer with the rag-picker and beggar, as mutually sharing in the pleasures offered by Saturday night. The time-space of New York on "poverty's saturnalia" signals a connection among the masses of the poor, a robust proletariat which incorporates the ragged into the broader social atmosphere. And in this his most sweeping depiction of those ground down by economic forces we see Foster once again set his sights on "the powerful, enlightened, wealthy community" for allowing so many to live so miserably that they have but one night a week to eat decently and enjoy themselves.⁴¹² Riddled with tensions and contradictions regarding the nebulous figures who make up its subjects, *New York by Gas-Light* maintains a great clarity throughout in aiming its populist ire upward even as it does not consider its subjects as capable of autonomously intervening in collectively changing their conditions themselves; yet these subjects often seem capable of more as the form of the text only serves to elucidate a partial portrait of a type of going-on rather than any specific instance, and this hazy image (as if itself only partially lit in the outer edges of the gaslight's glow) always necessarily contains more than the narrator's gaze can fully reveal, mysteries still deepening and lives still not totally known, subjects not yet totally captured by the author.

Foster the author, however, did end up captured. He was arrested in 1855 and sent to Moyamensing Prison in Philadelphia to await trial for forgery, having passed off faulty notes utilizing the forged signature of William E. Burton, an actor and theatre impresario

⁴¹¹ George G. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light*, 189.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, 192.

who Foster knew in New York.⁴¹³ In his own personal ventures as confidence man, we see a Foster who himself exists within the very milieu of nebulous figures he sought to introduce to his readership, someone who opted to take advantage of the ability to convert a phony signature into quick cash when down on his luck in an antebellum world where questions of identity and authenticity were rampant in financial matters.⁴¹⁴ Despite Foster's championing of the upright American mechanic and artisan, his own actions place him on a continuum with the petty graft he saw in the Five Points, blurring the line further in *New York by Gas-Light* between observer and participant in the social world of the underclass.

“This Queer Conglomerate Mass of Heterogeneous Elements”

Just as Foster spent time as a conman, Jacob Riis had at one time been a tramp. He had known the precarity of immigrant life in America and the difficulty of finding a steady wage to support the reproduction of one's life. Yet unlike Foster, Riis's muckraking exposés which left no question about the distance he felt between himself and those whose lives he wrote about, placing a wide gulf between the author who had pulled hard on his bootstraps and risen, and those in poverty who would not without sufficient prodding. Richard White sums up these biographical contradictions within Riis well:

In his life as well as his writings, Riis captured the ambiguities of the new, urban, industrial America. Like Edison, he had been a tramp working in the shipyards, lumber mills, factories, and icehouses of the Northeast and the Midwest. He had sold books on commission. He had been desperately poor, lonely, and lovesick. He

⁴¹³ Stuart M. Blumin, “Introduction: George G. Foster and the Emerging Metropolis,” in *New York by Gas-Light and Other Urban Sketches*, ed. Stuart M. Blumin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 41-2.

⁴¹⁴ See Stephen Mihm's *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

dismissed socialism as ‘nonsense,’ embraced self-improvement, opposed unions, and distrusted working-class amusements from the saloon to the theater.⁴¹⁵

Despite having once been a member of “the other half,” Riis’s 1890 opus *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* draws its line quite distinctly among the inhabitants of the city with a stringent (and at times strained) performance of objectivity. If in *New York by Gas-Light*, Foster sought to tell “the under-ground story” of the lower depths, leading him to rely upon narrative strategies genealogically related to those of the dime novel which were read by the working class, *How the Other Half Lives* stems from an extension of the popular public spectacle of Riis’s stereopticon lectures (initially titled “The Other Half: How It Lives and Dies in New York”) which utilized the photograph as a “safe form of a slumming, a kind of social voyeurism, to which Riis contributed a running patter of ethnic jokes.”⁴¹⁶ Riis’s public performances served as a way for an audience not of the largely immigrant tenement class to become acquainted with their squalid condition and leave roused with the spirit of urban reform.

Part genre pioneering photojournalistic reportage and part proto-sociological survey, *How the Other Half Lives* had roots in a significantly more bourgeois popular form than that of Foster and as a result of its intended audience, carried with it far more pernicious conclusions regarding the causes of and solutions to urban poverty in New York. Riis “developed a very liberal, middle-class, individualistic world-view that he carried with him into his reforming photographic projects” and this liberal spirit carries with it a strong aversion to any notion that the conditions of structural exploitation he found were genuinely

⁴¹⁵ Richard White, *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-96* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 693-4.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 693.

systemic to the capitalist mode of production.⁴¹⁷ Riis would argue that “the greed of capital that wrought the evil must itself undo it,”⁴¹⁸ a position which holds that any solution to the problems of the tenement must manifest from the conscience of capital while still any serious intervention “must be a business” and bound to the profit motive.⁴¹⁹ As White says, Riis “portrayed the tenements and their dwellers as the sources rather than the victims of problems,” which begins to explain something of his model of capitalist intervention: those who dwell within the tenements can be made over into more profitable workers and consumers whose tendency towards pauperism and criminality would be uprooted, no longer draining so much from the public coffers nor posing a threat to the stability of a hierarchical property order.⁴²⁰ I argue that this prior notion, that of containing a possible threat, looms larger over *How the Other Half Lives* than may be immediately apparent for a text which at one point notes that the riotous socialism once espoused at Tompkins Square in the 1870s had been tamed by merely by making it over into a park, “transform[ing] a nest of dangerous agitators into a harmless, beer-craving band of Anarchists” that “have scarcely been heard of since.”⁴²¹ Despite the text’s continual repetitions of the incapacity of “the other half” to individually nevertheless collectively advocate for their own interests, an alarmist paranoia still makes its way into the book as Riis cannot seem to convince himself one way or the other as to just how threatening the lives ongoing in the tenements really are and what kind of autonomous worlds exist therein. If we take Riis at his word that “the

⁴¹⁷ Tim Cresswell, *The Tramp in America* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 178.

⁴¹⁸ Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Hasia R. Diner (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 6-7.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴²⁰ Richard White, *The Republic for Which It Stands*, 694.

⁴²¹ Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 94.

causes that operate to obstruct efforts to better the lot of the tenement population are, in our day, largely found among the tenants themselves,”⁴²² what might this resistance to an imposed reform tell us about these people who Riis repeatedly reminds us occupy a space where “life there does not seem worth the living”?⁴²³

How the Other Half Lives details its mission statement early and often, centering around the corrupting nature of the tenement itself as the primary source out of which all the ills of the proletariat stem. If the home itself can be razed and a new standard of housing profitably applied, the so-called dangerous classes will pose far less of a challenge to bourgeois order. Riis paints the tenement itself and the class who occupies it in nigh apocalyptic terms:

...in the tenements all the influences make for evil; because they are the hot-beds of the epidemics that carry death to rich and poor alike; the nurseries of pauperism and crime that fill our jails and police courts; that throw off a scum of forty thousand wrecks to the island asylums and workhouses year by year; that turned out in the last eight years a round half million beggars to prey upon our charities; that maintain a standing army of ten thousand tramps with all that that implies; because above all, they touch the family life with deadly moral contagion. This is their worst crime, inseparable from the system.⁴²⁴

This passage shows us the logic undergirding his appeal for reform which rests upon the social cost of addressing “the other half” of New York. The rhetoric of “epidemic” and “contagion” alerts us already to a fear of uncontrolled spread. Though the former reference is to literal illness and the latter only metaphoric, both threaten to cross the line which separates decency from vice, and this contamination threatens to overspill the harsh boundaries of the property line. The “standing army of ten thousand tramps with all that

⁴²² *Ibid.*, 154.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

that implies” is an especially potent symbol of this mobile and spreading and threat. As Kathi Weeks argues, the tramp is not just an affront to labor discipline but to the order of the bourgeois patriarchal family as well:

Contrary to the central tenets of both the work ethic and the family ethic, the tramp is in each usage a figure of indulgence and indiscipline. Both male and female tramps are wanderers who refuse to be securely housed within and contained by the dominant institutional sites of work and family. Both are promiscuous in their unwillingness to commit to a stable patriarch, as shown in their lack of loyalty to an employer or to an actual or potential husband.⁴²⁵

This linkage between a threat to the work ethic and the family ethic marks the site of bourgeois property relations which Riis contends the private and social worlds of the tenement has severely degraded. Above all, a kind of authority seems to be melting away here among “this queer conglomerate mass of heterogeneous elements” whose very queerness seems to signal a resistance of sorts, an inability to neatly fit into a fixed arrangement of things.⁴²⁶ We see how this anxiety most prominently during the scene where Riis joins the police “as a kind of war correspondent” during a raid “on all the known tramps’ burrows” in Mulberry Bend. In the midst of this “war” fought on the nonlaboring class in a midnight assault, Riis describes how he and the cops twice “stumbled over tramps, both women, asleep in the passage.” These women promptly end up subject to physical assault, “sundry prods and punches” prior to their arrest for the crime of sleeping. As they prepare their raid on “three rickety frame tenements,” Riis described hearing “snatches of ribald songs and peals of coarse laughter” from the “foul and ragged host of men and

⁴²⁵ Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 166.

⁴²⁶ Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 16.

women” who end up rounded up and arrested.⁴²⁷ This so-called war on these men and women tramps alerts us to the ways in which the role of the police has its roots in “suppress[ing] vagrancy, then, to make the working class work.” As Mark Neocleous argues: “Vagrancy is regarded by the ruling class as a crime against capitalist order in general, a kind of *ur*crime from which all other crime stems.”⁴²⁸ The police see one who *is* a vagrant as a subject who must be eliminated from the social order by being set to work lest the contagion of slothful disorder spread to another. The presence of an “army” of tramps echoes Riis’s martial language in this scene of reporter playacting as cop and also tells us “all that that implies” in their presence is nothing short of a direct challenge to the bourgeois state’s ability to compel value production.

The other half simply lives too riotously.

How the Other Half Lives deploys a unique strategy of meaning making in order to make its case against the tenement and its populous—the photograph. Rooted in those earlier public performances of the slide show, *How the Other Half Lives* can utilize the magnesium flash to forcefully capture what the gaslight could only start to reveal, to objectify in an instant a world in the dark his readers may otherwise never encounter. Yet these photographs rarely reveal much themselves. Whether in the lecture or in his book, these images continually rely on Riis’s voice to contextualize them and assure the reader of the import of what they see. Hardly objective snap shots of life in the tenements, Riis admits to the performative nature of some of these images. Take the famous image of *The Tramp* which depicts a “particularly ragged and disreputable tramp” smoking a pipe who Riis

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁴²⁸ Mark Neocleous, *A Critical Theory of Police Power*, 24.

considers an especially picturesque representative of a type due to what Riis believes to be an excess of raggedness and disreputableness, a tramp to the nth degree. Riis claims to offer him a dime to pose for the photo, and the tramp accepts but puts away his pipe. When Riis requests he return it, the tramp knows he know has leverage and requests a quarter for a photo with the pipe: “The man, scarce ten seconds employed at honest labor, even at sitting down, at which he was an undoubted expert, had gone on strike. He knew his rights and the value of ‘work,’ and was not to be cheated out of either.” Without the scene Riis purports to have occurred, we would not see the pipe as especially noteworthy of the character, and a reader may in fact not recognize the character as a model of tramp-like appearance who like the rest of his type believes “that the world owes them a living.”⁴²⁹ The ragpickers’ labor Riis claims the tramp had been watching with lazed content appear nowhere at all in the photograph. His flash photography oft reveals even less. *An All-Night Two-Cent Restaurant in ‘The Bend’* (45) shows men asleep with heads down and a blurred face in motion, but of the teeming life therein we see only part of one face clearly in profile, the rest hidden away and unseen. Riis tells us that the racially integrated “black-and-tan saloon” marks the “worst of the desperately bad... [a] commingling of the utterly depraved of both sexes, white and black, on such ground, there can be no greater abomination”⁴³⁰; however, the photograph we see of one, *A Black-and-Tan Dive in ‘Africa’* is most remarkable for what it does not depict.⁴³¹ In what appears to be a posed photograph, the black woman in the left side of the frame leaves her back to the camera as she appears to read the paper she holds, a refusal of participation

⁴²⁹ Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 49.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

in the scene Riis wants his reader to believe is nothing less than a horrific crossing of the color line.

A Flat in the Pauper Barracks, West Thirty-Eighth Street, with All Its Furniture shows its two subjects with faces entirely blurred and illegible as the rest of the crumbling apartment and wrecked furniture appears in great clarity.⁴³² This photo epitomized the discursive strategy of Riis in *How the Other Half Lives*. The residents of the so-called pauper barracks can only be registered as bodies without a face, their individual personhood blurred to such a degree to be necessarily beside the point. The viewer is meant to gaze at the cracks in the crumbling wall and the broken-down furniture while the two who live there themselves huddle together in a doorway partially shut. Riis tells us that “there is a sharp line between” the pauper and the honest poor “but athwart it stands the tenement, all the time blurring and blotting it out.” The pauper, “as hopeless as his own poverty,” exists as purely a product of “the tenement, the destroyer of individuality and character everywhere.”⁴³³ Yet this man and woman have not had their individuality and character stolen by the tenement so much as they have had it stolen by the photograph Riis has opted to use, robbing them of any possible personality and autonomy, reducing them to the visual type of poverty and suffering alone, a type which Riis writes off as an incurable fault inherent within themselves. These photographs are characterized by absences, by a lacking. Saidiya Hartman writes of the reformer photography of the period and provides a critique of just how much it never seems capable of seeing: ““The surveys and the sociological pictures left me cold. These photographs never grasped the beautiful struggle to survive, glimpsed the alternative modes

⁴³² Ibid., 141.

⁴³³ Ibid., 140.

of life, or illuminated the mutual aid and communal wealth of the slum.”⁴³⁴ This life, in the full richness of its collective possibilities and resistances, its riotocratic dreaming, is simply missing. Riis leaves us with nothing but documented figures ever more nebulous, yet this lacuna tells us how much more was present than the crumbling walls of a slumlord’s flat, what these subjects kept hidden away and distant from the disdainful gaze of the camera. If a nebulous figure “only exists for other eyes—for the eyes of doctors, judges, grave-diggers, beadles, etc.,” the fact that the eyes of Riis can only see in the tenement a blurred and blotted personage who may be a wage laborer or a pauper demonstrates how the dividing lines Riis obsessively attempts to draw are visually unknowable and only manifest in the work relation itself, in the hours spent in the labor process.⁴³⁵ At home in the tenement, “this queer conglomerate mass of heterogeneous elements” blurs and blots into something the outside bourgeois observer struggles to know, making Riis reliant on a series of categories which have a “cash-value” residing only in their ability to assure his audience, like the cop on the beat, that there is *nothing* to see here.

How the Other Half Lives oscillates vastly in its claims about political economy, never able to proffer anything like a cogent theory for the blurring and blotting between the working poor and the pauper beyond resorting to notions of racialized character and ingrained habits, making the tenement stand in as both cause and effect of these social ills. At one moment, he suggests his solution to pauperism as compulsory labor, a need to harden a social rule of “no work, nothing to eat,” but then in the next paragraph provides an

⁴³⁴ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 19-20.

⁴³⁵ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1992), 335.

anecdote of “an honest laborer long out of work” whose child dies from starvation because of the frequent absence of “work and living wages.”⁴³⁶ He observes that those who live in the tenements have no “fixed value” to their employer unlike a “horse that pulls the dirt-cart one of these laborers loads and unloads,” though he fails to draw any conclusions from this as to *why* the working poor’s value in the eyes of capital is necessarily unfixed and is only ever measured during the wages paid out in the production process itself.⁴³⁷ Yet Marx explains this very phenomenon in that chapter on “The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation”:

The relative mass of the industrial reserve army thus increases with the potential energy of wealth. But the greater this reserve army in proportion to the active labour-army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to the amount of torture it has to undergo in the form of labour. The more extensive, finally, the pauperized sections of the working class and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. *This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.*⁴³⁸

Here in the “absolute general law of capitalist accumulation” we see the way in which capitalism creates the pauper out of the consolidated surplus population who either suffer the misery of unemployment or the torture of work in inverse proportion, lives conditioned not by the tenement but by the mode of production which has given rise to the tenement as a profitable model of housing this particular labor force whose connection to the wage remains perpetually tenuous and ever shifting based on the broader economic conditions of production. Similarly, Riis struggles to portray the social role of the unwaged labor of women which structure the world of the tenement. For instance, if “the true line to be

⁴³⁶ Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 155.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴³⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 798.

drawn between pauperism and honest poverty is the clothes-line,” then the distinction itself would have little to do with the relation to employment but rather the presence of enough hours in the day for the unwaged labor of women in the household over and above whatever waged labor they also must perform for their social reproduction of the household; thus, in Riis’s definition, not being a pauper requires a particular mode of labor over and above wage labor, an excess work.⁴³⁹ One can thus reach the status of pauper by not having access to waged work *and* by failing to do enough unwaged work. If “the kind of work carried on in any locality to a large extent determines their character,” and the “clothes-line” divides honest poverty from pauperism, then the character of honest poverty is necessarily the unwaged labor by and large performed by women who also must often perform wage labor as well.⁴⁴⁰ We also this unwaged work of women manifest as the subterfuge necessary for survival such as the moment when Riis attempts to call “at the home of a poor washer-woman.” Her oldest child tells Riis she is not home and only lets him in after Riis assures the girl that he is not a bill collector. All the while the mother “had been hiding from the instalment collector” inside the home.⁴⁴¹ Similarly, we find the begging “old woman who sat in Chatham Square with a baby done up in a bundle of rags” who has managed to con Riis out of repeated charitable offerings.⁴⁴² Riis notes that the begging routines which operate “under the cloak of undeserved poverty are numberless, and often reflect credit on the man’s ingenuity, if not on the man himself,” but he remains unable or unwilling to ponder why he bought the story in the first place which would alert him to the realization that the

⁴³⁹ Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 30.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, 142.

success of the woman's begging remained wholly dependent on his faulty interpretation of the deserving/undeserving binary. The woman who "had tramped the streets for weeks on her weary errand, and the only living wages that were offered her were the wages of sin" and ultimately commits suicide as a result certainly counts as deserving in Riis's calculus for she attempted to find work and was simply denied the opportunity; however, had she opted to go on living and taken up "the wages of sin" or a begging routine, she would be undeserving of alms yet still alive.⁴⁴³

Despite his text's continual reading of surface alone, we find flashes of depth it cannot pursue further, glimpses of a mystery his obsession with misery wants to assure his audience cannot still exist. Riis mentions how the anarchist, "won over by the promise of a general 'divide' espouses a politics for which "there is no room in this land of plenty," yet he tells us this in a paragraph about a man whose constant labor nets him under eight dollars a week to support a sick wife and four children all the while paying twelve dollars a month in rent for a hovel.⁴⁴⁴ That the very notion of an "other half" necessitates a general divide and that a "land of plenty" runs counter to the very descriptions of immiseration filling his text eludes Riis even as *How the Other Half Lives* frequently provides adequate detail for the fine grained details of just how this exploitation of the laboring and laborless classes functions. Another aspect of the "other half" Riis can only ever briefly touch on arises from the proclivity towards a baseline communism of mutual aid practiced in the tenements, "the readiness of the poor to share what little they have with those who have even less" which he deduces to materially arise from the fact "that the instinct of self-preservation impels them

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 134.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 74.

to make common cause against the common misery.”⁴⁴⁵ Here lies one of the most enduring mysteries of the city, the struggle on behalf of a making common a struggle amidst a common condition of exploitation, the way in which this “this queer conglomerate mass of heterogeneous elements” manages to autonomously struggle together, refusing as a collective to ever fully shed the riotocratic yearning for the common treasury of the earth from which they have been dispossessed and surviving by improvising new commons amidst the dismal conditions enshrined by the landlord’s privatization. This form of solidaristic struggle only remains a mystery to the bourgeois observer, inevitably linked to what Riis calls “the danger-cry of which we have lately heard in the shout that never should have been raised on American soil—the shout of ‘the masses against the classes’—the solution of violence.”⁴⁴⁶ He frets over the prospect that those “on the ‘unsafe’ side of the line that separates the rich from the poor” seem to have a better grasp on the material relations of capitalism which have led to the tenements as zones of usurious extraction.⁴⁴⁷ In the forty years between the mysteries of *New York by Gas-Light* and the miseries of *How the Other Half Lives*, a constant throughline runs among the descriptions of nebulous figures, a capability to occupy a “rich thicket of reality” which is so dense that neither the gas-light nor the flashbulb can fully expose the collective attitudes and dreams of those dwelling within it, a collective life of neither simply mystery nor misery but a robust excess which continually holds more territory in common than can be easily discerned by those observers who overlook what lies below.

Coda

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 97.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 149.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 150.

If the photographs in *How the Other Half Lives* attempt to flatten out tenement life into figurations of emptiness, defined by what they lack and cannot afford, legible as desperately impoverished by how much seems to be missing, the twentieth-century paintings of the Ashcan School show us something more, depicting an urban reality overflowing with a collective life of rich combination, a “tramp and vagrant world” which tends towards plurality over any singular reliance upon capturing a general type. Nebulous figures appear throughout in various forms, but never singularly as representatives of criminal vice or miserable isolation. Their cityscapes full of vast crowds in motion simultaneously feature idle lounging, laborers wait around and mill about, and time off the clock appears as both spectacular excess and everyday hardship. A response to the stodgy, classical realism championed by the National Academy of Design, the Ashcan School’s prominence can be historically bookended by the exhibition of “The Eight” (of whom only Robert Henri, William Glackens, John Sloan, George Luks, and Everett Shinn were Ashcan School artists) at Macbeth Galleries in 1908 and the 1913 Armory Show which brought the international modernism of Matisse and Duchamp to the fore of the art world. After this brief window, the Ashcan School artists found themselves outmoded; however, they above all “represented a revolution in subject matter, not in style,” a contingent whose representations of the everyday managed to couple the urban proletariat to a set of unremarkable activities, of existences not merely defined by the wage and its amount or its absence while “not trying to reform their subjects.”⁴⁴⁸ In Ashcan School realism, we see the foundation of the riotocracy,

⁴⁴⁸ Robert A. Slayton, *Beauty in the City: The Ashcan School* (Albany: State University of New York Press, Albany, 2017), 11.

its seedbed, in the temporalities shared outside of the laboring hours, fostered in collective life within shared material conditions in spite of capitalist productivism.

We may at a glance mistake Ashcan artist George Wesley Bellows's painting *Lone Tenement* (1909) for a visual extension of the photographs within *How the Other Half Lives*, but one more depiction of the harsh life of nebulous figures caught in the urban hell of tenement life. As the title denotes, the tenement building itself reigns in remote isolation at the center of the painting. Under Blackwell's Island Bridge which opened the same year of the painting's composition, the tenement exists as a relic from the past, a product left behind by Progressive Era development, a ruin of a world Riis depicted two decades previously which had already begun to pass. In the winter twilight, the painting's few dozen lumpen-figures gather around a fire while others mill about in pairs. In stark contrast to the loneliness of the building itself, these nebulous figures appear most remarkable for the sheer number of them present. Neither a romantic idealization of the hobo jungle nor a portrait of lonely misery, Bellows's landscape is one of an enduring sociality ongoing outside the tenement. In stark contrast to Riis's focus on the tenement's interior and its claustrophobic qualities, *Lone Tenement* demonstrates a tendency towards collectivity as a mode of surviving deprivation, a ragged community made in the shadow of capitalist development. In Bellows's *Cliff Dwellers* (1913), the densely populated Lower East Side makes for a tableau of motion and rest. As the elevated train passes in the background and trolley in the center of the street moves forward, the residents along the street engage in a wide array of the mundane. As the children play, adults rest on the fire escape or against the stoop, a woman does laundry, residents talk with one another, and some simply gaze at the goings on in the street. The

paining almost overwhelms in its density of visual information yet every subject engages in the unremarkable aspects of a summer day. As Theodore Dreiser writes of the painting: “It is so direct, so forthright. No pointed nuances. No hidden ones—any more than the broad, accurate face of life anywhere appears at a first glance to have any. A tall, obtuse triangle in a slum packed with the vibrant, necessary or unnecessary life of the slum, as you will.”⁴⁴⁹

Dreiser’s contention that there are “no hidden” nuances best illustrate what makes this portrait of life in “a slum” such a stark contrast to the mystery of the city inspired reportage of Foster and the social documentarianism of Riis. Bellows offers up the mere appearance of proletarian life without couching it as a revelation, a looking *sans* invasion and surveillance, a portrayal that does not seek to capture and expose, a visuality which does not seek to police.

Dreiser too has a connection to one of the most explicit depictions of unemployment undertaken by an Ashcan School artist as his friend Everett Shinn’s pastel *Fleischmann’s Bread Line* (1900) depicts the very same bread line Hurstwood would resort to utilizing in *Sister Carrie*.⁴⁵⁰ Donald Pizer argues that in this image Shinn’s ragged figures in the bread line “lack any semblance of individuality in their shared overriding condition of hunger; as an indistinct black mass they render the absence of whatever is distinctive in their personality history and being.”⁴⁵¹ Pizer’s interpretation, however, seems to ignore the possibility that this “indistinct black mass” of nebulous figures does not read as an absence of individual personality so much as the summation of a class formation, a grouping huddled

⁴⁴⁹ Theodore Dreiser, “‘The Cliff Dwellers’: A Painting by George Bellows,” *Vanity Fair*, December 1925, 55.

⁴⁵⁰ For an analysis of this scene, see Chapter III.

⁴⁵¹ Donald Pizer, “The Bread Line: An American Icon of Hard Times,” *Studies in American Naturalism* 2, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 114-15.

together in the harsh winter elements who in their contiguity represent a so-called surplus population who cannot be reduced to merely individualized stories of suffering but rather demonstrate an embodiment of the results of that “absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.” Like Shinn’s pastel, John Sloan’s painting *The Coffee Line* (1905) depicts a line of silhouetted nebulous figures, this time awaiting a free cup of coffee during a snowy winter night. Sloan, a socialist who served for a time as Art Editor for *The Masses*, heightens the effects found in Shinn’s sketch. Those wageless lives waiting in the coffee line are even less clearly depicted and more numerous than in Shinn’s. Here, they are so dimly lit and at such a distance that no individual features can be sought. Yet they have so blended together because Sloan’s narrator stands directly under a streetlight, at a distance from these figures, and this light source only illuminates so much. But rather than “penetrate beneath the thick veil of night and lay bare the fearful mysteries of darkness in the metropolis,” Sloan’s *Coffee Line* is content to simply let the veil fall upon those seeking a brief bit of warmth to help them through the night. Alexis L. Boylan writes that the Ashcan School’s greatest achievement in these paintings of vagrancy stem for their insistence on “making unemployment ordinary” so as “to reposition its social meanings.”⁴⁵² This making ordinary does not signal an attempt to make the experience of unemployment appear more palatable (and certainly not invisible) but instead serves to demonstrate it as a condition which any wage worker can at any moment find themselves occupying, an attempt to rid nebulous figures of a sensationalistic gaze and replace it with an understanding of their integral position within the regime of accumulation.

⁴⁵² Alexis L. Boylan, “Neither Tramp Nor Hobo: Images of Unemployment in the Art of the Ashcan School,” *Prospects* 30 (October 2005): 435.

Though the brief historical flashpoint of the Ashcan School with its lumpen-realism of a collective urban life lived against the wage would all but disappear from the fine art world in the post-World War I era, another visual depiction of a nebulous figure, the tramp, would have a mass cultural heyday far larger than any of its previous instantiations, no longer as the subject of dime novels, sociological surveys, or radical manifestoes but this time as the groundbreaking comedic figure capable of generating a great pathos predicated upon the anachronistic nature of his character, a presence from the past misplaced in the social milieu of the present. Despite being played for laughs. Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp, which in one of his tellings of it claimed to be based on a hobo he had in San Francisco whose "gesture, expressions, and mannerisms" he studiously observed while taking him out for dinner and drinks, still carried it with those riotocratic impulses of the long nineteenth century.⁴⁵³ The riotocracy's characteristics, however, no longer arose from a collective of nebulous figures who had abandoned wage labor and the state but rather in Chaplin's films becomes carried by the Little Tramp alone, by a singular figure who cannot fit within a capitalist order, never able to adapt himself to the rigors of production. The Little Tramp remains forever an excess, forever too much, with ragged clothes, movements, and dreams which are always too large and exaggerated and the Little Tramp almost always exists in roles upon the margins, tending continually towards an idleness which must be brought into line by the forces of the state's policing function. Writing in *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Siegfried Kracauer argues that the Little Tramp's dreams carry with them utopian longings and anticipations: "Chaplin's dream interludes not only accentuate the actual misery of the

⁴⁵³ Todd DePastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 158.

Tramp but anticipate a freedom from strictures and positive happiness. There is a touch of utopia about these challenges to space, time, and gravitation.”⁴⁵⁴ This dialectic of the Little Tramp’s dreams increasing our sense of his real, material impoverishment while simultaneously producing a vision of the world as it could be which is a “freedom from strictures” marks out the site of radical *poiesis*. Chaplin’s films forcefully tie together the lumpen characters of the Tramp, to the formal and technical achievements of the films themselves.⁴⁵⁵ Mutually tied together, the artistic breakthroughs of Chaplin’s films relies upon defamiliarizing the patterns and routines structured by a capitalist way of seeing and knowing, allowing us to develop an epistemology rooted in “this tramp and vagrant world,” a knowing rooted in the perspective of a world turned upside down which the Chaplin’s Tramp forever occupies. As Tim Cresswell suggests, Chaplin’s Little Tramp must continually reuse and remake the refuse of the world which then becomes manifest as a set of tactics which refuse the world of discipline and work:

As a marginal figure the tramp has constantly to make do with the flotsam and jetsam of normal life. He eats the leftovers of society in his Mulligan Stew, he wears clothes passed on and handed down, he (mis)uses the space of home, work and travel in novel and transformative ways. The tramp, in short, is a master of appropriation and tactical transgression.⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵⁴ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960).

⁴⁵⁵ “This is the anti-acting actor’s own contribution to cinema: he brings a paradoxical virtue into the machine age, and projects it onto the moving screen—a virtue already celebrated by Winckelmann in front of the *Belvedere Torso*, or by Hegel before Murillo’s little beggar boys: the virtue of doing nothing. He puts inertia into perpetual motion, caught both in the immediate efficiency of the reaction and in the uselessness of the mechanism that always returns to its original position. He makes this continual excess and lack of efficiency into the distinct art of moving shadows projected onto a depthless surface. His performance as an anti-acting actor is above all a perversion of the very logic of the agent.” Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2013), 204.

⁴⁵⁶ Tim Cresswell, *The Tramp in America*, 160.

We see this “appropriation and tactical transgression” throughout Chaplin’s oeuvre as The Little Tramp. In *The Immigrant* (1917), Chaplin plays a character who could easily end up the subject of one of Riis’s tenements, a newly arrived immigrant to New York who exists “hungry and broke,” wandering the streets. As he roams about, he finds a coin upon the ground but it unknowingly falls back through a hole in his pocket as the Tramp as immigrant is literally too ragged to keep money on his person. When after a series of comic coincidences and tribulations he manages to find the coin again after someone else has used it to pay a restaurant bill, the film reveals it to be a counterfeit which the receiver rejects. The fortuitous luck of the totally impoverished continually becomes no luck at all, a struggle for a single coin which cannot even be entered into circulation shows us the inability of a surplus figure to enter into the realm of value, kept out at every turn.⁴⁵⁷ 1921’s *The Idle Class* has the tramp mimicking that tie between the Veblenesque conspicuous leisure of the *haute bourgeois* and the comically conspicuous idleness of the vagrant which must be stamped out. This film opens upon a train’s arrival to a luxury resort. As wealthy vacationers exit from their cars, golf clubs in tow, (one even parodically wearing a monocle to drive the effete home), Chaplin emerges from a compartment underneath the train, carrying his measly set of three gold clubs (but no ball) for his own carnivalesque mimicry of the pursuit of pleasure *sans* the funds to afford it. The idleness bought and paid for and the idleness stolen from capital via non-productivity presents by way of extreme contrast the necessary contradictions of a world structured by the “absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.”⁴⁵⁸ The Little Tramp of *The Kid* who takes in the titular abandoned orphan, eventually sets up a mode of

⁴⁵⁷ *The Immigrant*, directed by Charlie Chaplin (Mutual Film Corporation, 1917), The Criterion Channel.

⁴⁵⁸ *The Idle Class*, directed by Charlie Chaplin (First National, 1921), The Criterion Channel.

familial reproduction which relies upon the logic of the scam, a paid artisanal labor which must be stolen. As the Kid throws rocks through windows, Chaplin the glazier comes along to replace them, creating a market and then capitalizing off of it in a miniature parody of the capitalist production of need.⁴⁵⁹ By the time of 1931's *City Lights*, the Great Depression was in full swing and the opening sequence displays perhaps the Little Tramp's most stunning intrusion into the filmic space which herein doubles as a kind of political celebration of capitalism's triumphs. As a new monument to "Peace and Prosperity" is set to be unveiled at a mass rally of bourgeois self-congratulation, the veil lifts to reveal the Little Tramp cradled in the statue's arms, the reality of proletarian deprivation arriving in the tragic as comedic shattering of ruling class spectacle. As the homeless and unemployed nebulous figure bursts upon the scene, the angered crowd briefly stops their haranguing of the Little Tramp to stand at attention for the "Star Spangled Banner." The Little Tramp, caught upon the statue's sword of imperial might, continually slips and falls as he tries to stand up, unable to perform a gesture of national belonging even temporarily, forever marked by the vagrant's status as an undesirable and unfit member of the polity. In the midst of the most intense crisis of capital of the twentieth century, the riotocracy once more rears its head in the cultural arena, figured as the pauperized cast off of capitalism, a dispossessed "vogelfrei"⁴⁶⁰ whose freedom allows them to either starve in alienation or organize against wages and states.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁵⁹ *The Kid*, directed by Charlie Chaplin (First National, 1921), The Criterion Channel.

⁴⁶⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume One*, 896.

⁴⁶¹ *City Lights*, directed by Charlie Chaplin (United Artists, 1931), The Criterion Channel.

By 1936, however, the Little Tramp makes his curtain call in *Modern Times* in which the film opens upon him not on the road or the street but on the factory line. Chaplin's Tramp of *Modern Times* no longer belongs to the past. Unmoored from being a holdover of the long nineteenth century, he has been recast fully into what Michael Denning calls "the age of the CIO."⁴⁶² Thrown in and out of industrial labor, a (by accident) fellow traveler in communist marches and industrial strikes, the Little Tramp has become a modern member of the newly pauperized, a part of the mass unemployment and relief schemes, labor activism and leftist energies of the 1930s. Even as the film concludes with the once again unemployed tramp and his fugitive partner, this road leads definitively to the future, and with it, to the eclipse of the riotocracy's cultural moment.⁴⁶³ The riotocracy has now become "a residual cultural element" within the popular front era, a remnant from the past which will continue forward into the twentieth century as a resistance to the value form and the state within ever evolving forms of struggle and the cultural productions these forms inevitably give rise to, a modality of possibility that remains lingering on, unextinguished, and ever moving forward in those moments of idle stillness which give rise to new visions of the world to come, the surplus dreams of the nebula.⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶² Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 2010), 21-38.

⁴⁶³ *Modern Times*, directed by Charlie Chaplin, (United Artists, 1936), The Criterion Channel.

⁴⁶⁴ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

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Conclusion

Whether as contingent or uncollectivized labor, as micro-entrepreneurs or subsistence criminals, or simply as the permanently unemployed, the fate of this ‘superfluous’ humanity has become the core problem for twentieth-first-century Marxism.

—Mike Davis, *Old Gods, New Enigmas: Marx’s Lost Theory*

Modern industrial civilization is on the brink of setting the world on fire. The eradication of social formations and communities is intertwined with the extinguishing of the living earth-system on which a human commons depends. We’re now experiencing capitalism in its terminal, scorched earth phase.

—Jonathan Crary, *Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World*

This project has sought to identify and track an assemblage of anti-work tendencies which have left impressions within the cultural stratum of the latter half of the long nineteenth century in America. In weaving together the textual archives wherein these markings can be found (often only ever faintly and sometimes only partially legible), I have grouped these desires (for they are above all else knowable as a shared *striving*) under the banner of the riotocracy. The riotocracy is that modality which Melville described as formed by a confederation of insurgents who offered “great inducements...to deserters” to come together in the establishment of a makeshift and improvised commons in which the space held became collectively remade into an “asylum of the oppressed” where all those who abandon the hierarchy of labor discipline can find themselves “hailed as a martyr in the cause of freedom,” interpellated into a lumpen-citizenship of a “universal nation.”

Throughout, I have attempted to demonstrate both where and how Melville’s imagining of the riotocracy has harmonious moments in a variety of texts produced in America during the period between the 1840s and the 1920s, moments which elicit a feeling against wage labor and its disciplining functions. The site of this “lurking-place of all sorts of desperadoes, who in the name of liberty did just what they pleased” upon escaping from work evokes a

movement against a kind of enclosure, one which sought the further privatization and capture of the working day to encompass the totality of life.⁴⁶⁵ It is here on Charles's Isle that a new commons comes to be established among the escapees. The participants within the riotocracy are those unrecognized by bourgeois political economy, what Marx refers to as those "nebulous figures" such as the "unoccupied worker, the working man in so far as he is outside this work relationship" alongside "the swindler, the cheat, the beggar, the unemployed, the starving, the destitute and the criminal working man."⁴⁶⁶ It is to this contingent, this nebula, that I have positioned as the primary actors who drive forward the communistic, anarchistic, and utopian methods of the riotocracy.

A key question remains with us, however: whether the riotocracy from here? Did it merely disappear as a culturally discernible mode of anti-work political desire or does it find itself perpetually reconstituted alongside particular branches of revolutionary politics, a feature identifiable by its commitment to the abolition of the value form and with it the hierarchical modalities of labor and governance? Is it merely a stand-in for a protean form of politics which inevitably found itself outmoded by the global developments of socialist and communist political forms which found themselves waging struggles for state power? The rough temporal bounds I have herein assigned to it certainly do not fully contain its phenomenal existence. Yet, what kind of afterlife can it have when it can hardly be said to have ever fully flowered, when it is only ever known in its ephemerality as a loose assemblage of practices and cultural daydreams which carried within themselves overflows

⁴⁶⁵ Melville, "The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles," in *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 104.

⁴⁶⁶ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1992), 335.

of possibility, a set of refusals which seem to have briefly bubbled up to the surface in the minutiae of a diverse set of textual records? And, perhaps above all else, what can the notion of the riotocracy sketched herein offer to us now in our present?

I contend that the riotocratic, though increasingly diminished as a residual cultural form, did not simply cease as a political striving from those on the outsides and undersides of capital accumulation.⁴⁶⁷ The International Council Correspondence group based out of Chicago, Illinois in 1938's "What Can the Unemployed Do?" from their periodical *Living Marxism* write that they have opted to reject those slogans which demand work for those without it since they "cannot conceive of their fulfillment in ways other than through greater miseries as were previously experienced by the workers."⁴⁶⁸ They note that throughout nineteenth-century American worker movements, the plight of the unemployed continually hampered the revolutionary development of broad based solidarity (a fracture between the ragged proletariat and the wage laboring proletariat):

The absence of important socialist movements and the attitude of the trade unions led to an almost complete neglect of the unemployment problems and excluded support of their struggles through workers' solidarity. Only in times of utter despair spontaneous unemployment movements arose, unrecognized in their significance by the existing labor organizations, and unable to assert themselves with more than a mere demonstration of their misery, and disappearing without result again into the night.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁷ Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 2010) provides an extraordinary account of the cultural productions of the popular front in the age of the CIO. We see herein a heterogeneous cultural production which oscillates between an explicit concern with revolutionary and reformist aspirations, a tension inherent to the broad formation of the popular front as such.

⁴⁶⁸ International Council Correspondence, "What Can the Unemployed Do?," *Living Marxism* 4, no. 2 (1938): 52.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

Their suggestion here, that the unemployed by and large could only come to the fore in brief flashpoints of struggle before fading back “again into the night,” leads them to develop their critique of any reformism or radicalism which does not take seriously the problem of unemployment as fundamental to the capitalist mode of production as it in fact remains the very content of our work itself, what we do and how we do it, our ongoing alienation from being able to autonomously and creatively *make* our work our own which must remain continually the site of struggle.⁴⁷⁰ In the second half of “What Can the Unemployed Do” from the subsequent issue, they look to the actual activity of the unemployed themselves, turning to the bootlegging coal miners of 1930s Pennsylvania who while thrown out of work began to expropriate coal themselves in small scale operations and sell it. Though they note that this illegal practice of opting to make a living outside the company itself can hardly be idealized, especially given its dangers and instabilities, they make the case that this reclamation signals a significant event:

The problems of all workers are here, so to speak presented in a nutshell. All that is really necessary for the workers to do in order to end their miseries is to perform such simple things as to take from where there is, without regard to established property principles or social philosophies, and to start to produce for themselves.⁴⁷¹

They argue that rather than lacking some proper class consciousness that would awaken them to socialism, these unemployed miners in Pennsylvania have in fact enacted the beginnings of the communistic (that need only be generalized for genuine upending of

⁴⁷⁰ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward’s chapter on the unemployed workers’ movements in the 1930s in *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) possesses crucial insights into precisely this tension between radical, self-organized autonomous actions of the unemployed and the increasing tendency of organizational forms to end up caught in the dead ends of reformist appeals to the state.

⁴⁷¹ International Council Correspondence, “What Can the Unemployed Do?”, *Living Marxism* 4, no. 3 (1938): 90-1.

capitalism) by choosing to abandon the form of wage labor for a reproduction of life on their own terms, spurred by their rejection of the current private property order. In this moment, the riotocratic abandonment of the old form of work had been supplanted by necessity by these now ragged proletarians thrown out of the wage labor system who sought to labor anew without owners and bosses.

In 1962, C. L. R. James (under the pseudonym of J. R. Johnson taken during his time with the Johnson-Forest Tendency) writes of the ways in which a so-called actually existing socialism has been unable to fundamentally change the miserable conditions found in the production process: "...where and how is the situation of the workers in the labor process organically improved? An assembly line in Moscow is an assembly line in Detroit."⁴⁷² A revolutionary spark remains in all those workers who still find themselves drained and degraded by the conditions of their work, a discontent with the dehumanization found in the form itself. The riotocracy still persists as a dream of laboring otherwise:

The American worker has the highest standard of living in the world. This has not made him into a lover of capitalism. What Marxism aims at is not merely a decent living wage for all. It seeks above all to get rid of the wearisome, dull, grinding labor day after day, year after year, crushing the human personality, with no prospect of developing the human interests, needs and capacities of man as a human being with aspirations to live and develop a fully human life.⁴⁷³

James's critique cuts right to the problem at the cork of working life, namely, that it stultifies and stunts our very humanity. Good wages and high standards of living do not eradicate this fundamental alienation, this separation from what it may mean "to live and develop a fully human life." Similarly, James Boggs writing one year after James in *The American Revolution:*

⁴⁷² J. R. Johnson [C. L. R. James], *Marxism and the Intellectuals* (Detroit: Facing Reality Publishing Committee, 1962), 12.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*

Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook echoes a desire for that riotocratic formation which makes each “a ragged citizen of this universal nation.” Boggs declares the need for “the classless society—a society in which the antagonisms and divisions between classes, races, and people of different national backgrounds are eliminated and people can develop among themselves civilized and cooperative relations.”⁴⁷⁴ But Boggs also notes the growing problem of nebulous figures, of those cut off from the life-giving wage, who he terms “the outsiders.” He claims that “the right to live has always been so tied up with the necessity to produce that it is hard for the average person to visualize a workless society,”⁴⁷⁵ but since capitalism has reached a particular stage of productive capacity in the industrial sector because of automation, a wave of unemployment would soon be ushered in which would separate an increasing number of people from access to productive wage labor.⁴⁷⁶ Boggs contends that this condition, will initially disproportionately impact black workers but it will become a general condition as more and more industrial workers find themselves phased out of the production process. His proposed solution, the adoption of the classless society which could dissolve the boundaries of class and race, would abolish the connection between productivity and value and replace it with the enshrinement of one’s “value as a human being.”⁴⁷⁷ James and Boggs both formulate a critique of the conditions of work itself and the

⁴⁷⁴ James Boggs, *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook*, in *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook: A James Boggs Reader*, ed. Stephen M. Ward (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 108.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 109

⁴⁷⁶ For more on this phenomenon and its relation to deindustrialization and the growth of the service economy, see Aaron Benanav's *Automation and the Future of Work* (London: Verso, 2020) and Jason E. Smith's *Smart Machines and Service Work: Automation in an Age of Stagnation* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020).

⁴⁷⁷ Boggs, *The American Revolution*, 110.

need to push against the ways in which the form of labor as value production fundamentally dehumanizes us, alienating us not only from one another but also from ourselves.

We even find anti-work aspirations manifest in the heart of the workplace in all those strivings against the labor process itself, evident in (partial) abandonments of its rigors, demands, and disciplinary structures. In Noel Ignatiev's posthumously published memoir, *Acceptable Men: Life in the Largest Steel Mill in the World*, we catch glimpses of the riotocratic in action during his time at the U.S. Steel Gary Works in Gary, Indiana during the 1970s. When the surveillance of the office supervisors is gone and the night shift begins, Ignatiev's fellow workers alert him to his duty: "My first assignment is to learn how to play hearts."⁴⁷⁸ At one point, when a foreman intrudes upon a card game to assign some workers to look after some equipment, one responds, "can't you see I'm busy?" and returned to the game.⁴⁷⁹ This moment of a refusal illustrates a key thesis Ignatiev develops across the course of his memoir regarding the capacity of the workers' self-activity to set the terms of their own working lives. Sometimes this resistance manifests as recreation like cards or an on the clock cookout. Other times we see it in more active forms like the direct refusal to work at the pace set by the bosses: "There I learned my first lesson of factory life. My fellow workers taught me how to run the machine and also how to sabotage it when I needed a break. They taught me what was a reasonable amount of work to turn out so that I neither broke the rate nor let me fellow workers down."⁴⁸⁰ They swap stories swapped about pilfering from the

⁴⁷⁸ Noel Ignatiev, *Acceptable Men: Life in the Largest Steel Mill in the World* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 2021), 9.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

plant.⁴⁸¹ The most frequent escape from work while on the job comes in the form of refusing simply to be conscious as the workers on midnight shifts continually steal back time in the form of finding places to sleep. Throughout, Ignatiev stresses how little the formal mechanism of redress and workplace democracy, the union, plays in the day-to-day life of the workers in the plant, and how often they instead opt for autonomously organized solutions and arrangements to what their work life should feel like. These moments in which the men and women at work seek to recreate it on their own terms shows the still present remnants of the riotocratic, of the desire to challenge the basic rules of workplace discipline by above all avoiding work as much as possible without negatively impacting other coworkers, a mutuality of collective slacking and temporal reclamations, of refusing to give all of one's life to waged hours. When Ignatiev asks Dorothy, a black woman on the labor gang, why the steelworks does not see more wildcat strikes, she responds: "It's because the people here are always on strike."⁴⁸² Melville described the riotocracy as "permanent," as a continual state of rebellion against authority, and in the Gary steelworks, the employees of U.S. Steel time and again stage the minor revolts of endless subterfuge and sabotage, "always on strike" even when on the clock.⁴⁸³

The most important means of understanding the continued import of the riotocracy arises within our time from the disastrous impasse of the Capitalocene.⁴⁸⁴ Faced with the

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 50-1.

⁴⁸² Ibid., 90.

⁴⁸³ Melville, "The Encantadas," 104.

⁴⁸⁴ "If 'the Anthropocene' is an indefensible abstraction at the point of departure as well as the end of the line, might there be a more adequate term for the new geological epoch?...Unlikely to gather anything like a consensus behind it, a more scientifically accurate designation, then, would be 'the Capitalocene.' This is the geology not of mankind, but of capital accumulation." Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016), 391.

irreparable damage of a changing climate, we must recognize the sheer degree to which this global heating results by and large through the organization of capitalist labor, of the unceasing means of accumulation and value production. Imagining a substantial portion of the working world to simply stopping in order to take the first steps towards a new modality of collectivism may appear naïve, simplistic, or romantic. Yet when compared to the “harsh, martial working conditions” we find ourselves caught within which in their totality arch towards the very negation of planetary life, the ongoing machinations of capital’s accumulative tendencies appear as far more naïve, simplistic, and romantic, for it is only in the (ever more) fevered mind of capital and its most loyal adherents that the ability to continue onward with this regime appears possible.⁴⁸⁵ The utopian promises, those riotocratic imaginings of a world in which our everyday could be profoundly different, linger, growing more vivid and graspable the more readily it appears that there can be no future for capitalism when its living labor can live no more. Degrowth, deceleration, and decarbonization are all fundamental requirements for a politics of the present which can preserve any future at all. The riotocracy’s general antagonism to the way we have (and continue to) work under capitalism is a vital tradition to embrace. The way we work now cannot be redeemed. As Marx himself noted in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, to merely shift the value around and redistribute it so we get all the value of our labor was always already an impossibility; now it is something else.⁴⁸⁶ For how can we all share in a value that contributes to the devastation of the future of the human species? What kind of redistribution is it to hold a more equitable piece of dust? What does it mean to seize the

⁴⁸⁵ Melville, “The Encantadas,” 104.

⁴⁸⁶ Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, in *The Political Writings* (London: Verso, 2019).

means of production if we merely control the flows of the pipeline ourselves? The riotocracy proposes that the first step is the hardest but the most necessary: the collective abandonment of these forms of work. We must embrace a willingness to leave behind a system which ensures the collective destruction of the planet and look instead to how we can decelerate our descent into an unlivable world. In that wide gulf between what we have and what we need, between the profit motive and our human potential, Charles's Isle ever remains glimpsable.⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸⁷ This project itself came to completion within just such a crisis of the Capitalocene. The Covid-19 pandemic coincided with this energy of the long C19. In a moment in which so much (and far too little) came to a halt and everything slowed, this crisis signaled the immediate necessity to rethink what it means to work and produce.

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