Lyric Histories:
On the Appearance of Time in Twentieth-Century Poetry

BY

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THESIS
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With those thanks, I want to include this, a poem by the first poet I ever loved:

To whom do I dedicate this new, charming little book just now polished with a dry pumice stone?
To you, Cornelius, for you were accustomed
to think that my nonsense was something,
then already when you alone of Italians
dared to unfold every age in three papyrus rolls,
learned, Jupiter, and full of labor. Therefore have for yourself whatever this is of a little book,
of whatever sort; which, O patron maiden, may it remain everlasting, more than one lifetime.

-JHP
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SUMMARY

*Lyric Histories: On the Appearance of Time in Twentieth Century American Poetry* is shaped by literary criticism’s renewed attention to the lyric poem in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. While the novel form seems incapable of capturing a world in which the economy accelerates and expands every moment, the temporality of the lyric poem is perfectly suited to the milieu of the Great Recession and its aftermath. *Lyric Histories* directly addresses the temporal difference between narrative and lyric, tracing the appearance of narrative, in the form of primary historical documents, in poetry throughout the twentieth century. These poems containing history are animated by the foundational generic tension between lyric and narrative. The collision of lyric and history alters the lyric form; how each poet manages the aesthetic reverberations of this generic conflict has clear political corollaries. The nexus of aesthetics and politics available in these poems offers a standpoint from which we might see the history of twentieth-century economics and politics more clearly.
Poems Containing History

You’re either with us
or you’re with the fiction writers
—Guy Bennett

_Lyric Histories_ addresses the sudden resurgence of lyric studies in the wake of the Great Recession. In what follows, I demonstrate how careful attention to the lyric surface can provide a new vantage point not only on lyric studies (particularly Marxist lyric studies) but also on twentieth-century U.S. economic and political history. The revived interest in the lyric poem, I contend, is the result of lyric’s ability to capture the world of global economic crisis that has emerged over the past decade. While poetry has been all but peripheral to Marxist literary criticism for much of the past half-century, the past year has been marked by the return of the lyric form to the center of anti-capitalist literary studies.¹ For many of these critics, lyric’s relevance depends precisely on its generic difference from fiction.

For example, Andrew Hoberek reads the turn to the poetic form in _The Financial Lives of Poets_ as evidence of “the breakdown of the novel’s historical capacity to translate fact into some sort of socially useful truth” (54). Ruth Jennison demonstrates the continuity between “the figural and the unseen” in poetry, “metaphors, similes, line breaks, vast and micro fields of white space, allusions” and “a world financial system that is increasingly conducted in an invisible manner, through derivatives, currency trading, outsourcing, collateralized debt obligations, and so on,” that will allow us to “tunnel… out of a critical sediment comprising a seemingly infinite history of revisions of one concept: narrative” (38–39). And, finally, Joshua Clover, in “Retcon: Value and Temporality in Poetics” writes that, “while narrative fiction has been taken insistently as the relevant literary mode or genre for understanding the motion and particularly the
temporality of finance, poetry finally provides a better heuristic for such an understanding” (13). The lyric project takes over, then, where the narrative project has left off.²

In these arguments, lyric and narrative are placed in both temporal (pre- and post-2008) and formal opposition. Their formal opposition, however, is a form of appearance of their dialectical relationship, which becomes evident in their different relationships to time. For example: Jonathan Culler writes, “if narrative is what happens next, lyric is what happens now” (202); Sharon Cameron argues that “the moment is to the lyric what sequence is to the story” (204); George Poulet describes the Romantic project as a desire to bring “Eternity into Time” (7). Poulet calls the relationship between “Eternity and Time” paradoxical, but eternity and time do more than oppose each other, they also constitute each other. That is, the notion of time is part of the notion of timelessness: we could not designate the lack of time without time’s existence; nor could we understand the idea of “time” without its other, understood as timelessness or eternity. When taken together eternity and time produce totality, understood in the Hegelian sense, that is, the identity of identity and difference. Their reciprocal constitution is their identity; their opposition is their difference. Lyric may deal with the “now” and “the moment,” but “next” and “the sequence” constitute and oppose lyric’s perpetual present.

Narrative, therefore, appears dialectically in every lyric poem. The poems under consideration in what follows, however, take this dialectic as their foundation. Each poet introduces narrative into the lyric form through the incorporation of primary historical material and thereby redoubles the tension between the forward motion of narrative and the perpetual present of lyric. As such, each poem is an expression of the totality of now and next. Such a totality uncovers the aesthetic configurations that allow time and history to appear.
The stakes of the appearance of history are best captured in Susan Howe’s maxim “If history is a record of survivors, Poetry shelters other voices” (Birth-Mark 47). Echoing the arguments made by Walter Benjamin in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Howe turns the poet into the true historical materialist whose task it is to “brush” those moments in which history appears “against the grain” and rebuke the historical record that serves only to prop up the victorious (Benjamin 257). In Howe’s formulation the dialectical opposition between history and poetry makes the dialectical relationship between winner and loser visible. As such, history is transformed from a “record of survivors” into a complete account of the social: the victorious and the vanquished.

In the final chapter of Frederic Jameson’s Valences of the Dialectic, he argues that the appearance of history gives us the “truth of this society” (564). There, following Paul Ricouer’s work on time and narrativity, he overlays Aristotelian plot structure on history. Jameson reads the three plots—anagnorisis (recognition), periepeteia (reversal), and pathos (suffering)—as distinct, but in both Aristotle and Ricouer they denote movements in a larger narrative structure. (For example, Oedipus’s recognition of Jocasta as his mother leads to a reversal of his fortunes and his suffering.) Separating them allows Jameson to trace particular aesthetic structures across literary history. But putting them back together will allow us to see more clearly how these dialectical arrangements make the structure of society visible.

Geoffrey de Ste. Croix’s The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World, a corrective to Livy’s Early History of Rome, is Jameson’s representative of recognition. Livy’s text “has often been taken as the very prototype of class struggle,” describing it in terms of the oppression of the “commoners” by “the great and wealthy aristocratic families” that run the Roman Senate (Jameson 565). Ste. Croix argues that Livy misunderstands Rome’s economic system. The
commoners were not, he asserts, “the producers of surplus value in this social system”: the slaves were (566). As a result, on Ste. Croix’s account, the Spartacus revolt (not the “political squabbles” between the plebeians and the Senators that are central to Livy’s text) represents class conflict in the ancient world (567). Jameson summarizes Ste. Croix’s discovery: “this emergence of some ultimate subject of history bearing the full weight of all of human production and value on its back surely constitutes the strong form of historical anagnorisis or recognition as such” (567). Not only does Ste. Croix recognize the slaves as the “ultimate subject of history,” but he reveals something more important to our project: the “commoners” are both the oppressed and the oppressors. Thus, they hold a dual position in Roman society. Ste. Croix recognizes not only the true source of class conflict in Rome but also the fact that the commoners condense the totality of the Roman economic system: an analysis of their social position makes the structure of Roman society visible.

Jameson’s example of reversal is Peter Quint’s *Epic and Empire*, which argues that the *Aeneid* is not, as it is commonly understand, Augustan propaganda. Rather, Virgil incorporates the story of Dido to undermine the Roman imperial program. The “official story” is an epic, a mash up of the *Odyssey* (Aeneas “comes home” to Rome following the destruction of Troy) and the *Iliad* (the Romans must defeat the Italian tribes to secure their future). The second story is the romance plot. When read as imperial propaganda, Dido’s suicide foreshadows Rome’s successful destruction of Carthage at the end of the third Punic War in the century before the *Aeneid* was written. In Quint’s reading, however, Carthage becomes the tragic stand-in for Troy at the same time that Rome becomes its triumphant stand-in: Carthage is Troy destroyed anew; Rome is Troy rebuilt. For Jameson, the double-reversal built into the structure of *Aeneid* makes it “available again by uncovering the vein of silver that runs through its imperial gold, and...
reveal[s] the story of failure and the experience of defeat that secretly accompany all victories” (557). That is, the Aeneid represents loss at exactly the time that it represents victory: Aeneas must desert Dido for Rome to be founded and for the Aeneid to be written (just as Troy had to burn for the establishment of the Greek empire and for the composition of the Odyssey and the Iliad). That is, the reversal plot is not just one in which someone goes from victor to defeated but also one in which the figure occupies both positions simultaneously: the exact position the Roman “commoners” occupy in Ste. Croix.

As such, both texts reveal the unity of two conflicting subject positions in certain historical figures; both are the identity of identity and difference. When we look at these figures—Quint’s Aeneas and Ste. Croix’s plebeians—we have the whole argument in an instant: Aeneas’s position as both victim and victor is Virgil’s critique of Augustus; the plebeians’ position as oppressed and in the business of oppression gives us the structure of Roman society. The production of totality is, at last, the revelation of the structure of society. The appearance of history in these poems, then, is the revelation of the identity of identity and difference that structures the social world.

In the case of the Aeneid, Jameson argues that this revelation depends on the conflict between two temporalities. Aeneas’s romance with Dido is the hinge point between the two epic plots condensed in the Aeneid: his desertion of Carthage and her resulting suicide mark the movement from an epic in the style of the Odyssey and an epic in the style of the Iliad. The transition between these two plots is enabled by the temporal disruption produced by the romance plot:

Epic… [is] the genre par excellence of narrative time… [R]omance uses its narrative mechanisms to express a kind of non-narrative time… At its outer limit, its organizational form… threatens to break down into discontinuous encounters
and experiences, non-narrative moments of the present which a different generic system would not doubt want to identify as lyrical. (555)

That is, the appearance of the non-narrative romance with Dido is what makes the revelation of totality possible.

In fact, if we reincorporate recognition and reversal into the Aristotelian narrative structure, we see that the structure is built on this very tension between narrative and lyric. Pathos does not denote action, but rather names “a specific moment of the theatrical spectacle” such as “the suicide of Ajax, Medea surrounded by her dead children, Oedipus blinded, or, perhaps even more paradigmatic for the traditional understanding of pathos, the Laocoön statuary” (552, 583). Pathos, then, is in the non-narrative tableau that closes the action of the plot: while recognition and reversal are ways of describing narrative structure, pathos indicates one moment. The relationship between pathos and the narrative structure from which it emerges is identical to the relationship between the epic and romance plots in the Aeneid, identical, in fact, to the dialectical relationship between narrative and lyric I have been tracing so far. As Jameson writes:

The experience of [pathos] is truly dialectical, insofar as it involves an articulation of these three categories [recognition, reversal, and pathos] which also unites them in a single reality, that of pathos itself, which, from being a word for one part of the process, comes to stand in for the whole of the process itself as appearance. (585)

That is, just the narrative structures of Class Struggle in the Ancient World and Epic and Empire produce a single figure in whom the whole structure of society is condensed, so does the revelation of suffering at the end of the tragedy produce a tableau in which the whole plot is condensed. The lyric, when read dialectically with narrative, reveals totality.

The pathetic tableau in Jameson functions as a condensation of the plot, but for Allen Grossman, it—and specifically the Laocoön statuary—functions as a figure for the poet. In True-
Love: Essays on Poetry and Valuing, Grossman argues that the work of the lyric is above all the work of recognition. He writes:

After the first unrepresented moment (the beginning of the world), which unfixes the difference of divinity, there follows the cosmic (i.e., general) conflict…which, in order to restore that lost difference or its effect, supplies the (unstable) terms—race, class, and gender (let us say)—by which the recognizability of the face (its value acknowledged, its intelligibility determined) is narrated.

The capacity to value persons is dependent upon the intelligibility of experience. At the moment when experience ceases to be intelligible, experience produces (let us say, obtrudes) its own image for inspection. That is the moment of poetry. (76–77)

That is, in the absence of the ultimate difference between humanity and divinity, humans have reproduced the concept of difference as the differences between “race, class, and gender.” The Laocoön statuary depicts the production of difference and the recognition of its instability in tableau form. Laocoön was the priest of Poseidon (the only of the Trojans to recognize that the Trojan Horse was a trap and to interpret that trap as evidence of the gods’ preference for the Greeks); as punishment, he and his two sons were devoured by snakes sent by the god he served. Grossman argues that Laocoön “was destroyed because he knew the truth” of the Trojan Horse, which is also the truth of how “(unstable) terms,” like Greek and Trojan or “race, class, and gender,” come to denote which human forms count as intelligible and which do not. It is not the priest who is the image of the poet, but rather the statue—or, rather, the sculptor (unknown) who made the original statue—that becomes Grossman’s figure for the poet. He writes that the statue visualizes “what the poet knows—Solus sapit hic homo. The poet is the kind of maker who knows this” (76). That is, the poet is the only figure capable of producing an image that captures both the knowledge of the universal recognizability of the human form and the pain that accompanies such knowledge. The revelation of this figure, Grossman argues, makes the experiences of these subjects intelligible and reintegrates them into the social whole. This, then, is the other valence of Susan Howe’s maxim “[i]f history is the record of survivors, Poetry
shelters other voices”: the lyric form’s ability to give voice to those figures silenced by official historical records thereby renders their experiences intelligible and their humanity recognizable.

This meaning of recognition—distinct from how it appears in Aristotle and Jameson—is a minor note in Lyric Histories. I posit that a totalizing view on contemporary society must account for the structure of society with regard to the people who make and made by it. This is, finally, another dialectical pair: the form of our society and its content. Left criticism has been divided into two camps: on one hand, there are those who understand a critique of the social on the register of identity as compatible with the operations of capital; on the other are those who argue that critiques on the register of economics fail to account for the specific forms of economic and political domination experienced by those excluded on the basis of gender, race, sexual identity, and so on. By reading recognition both ways—as a way of seeing the social whole and making all human forms legible—I will pull out a few moments that demonstrate the ways in which an account of gender and racial identity helps us to see larger structural forces. As such, I hope to show economic and identitarian approaches to literary criticism are not only compatible, but, in fact, reciprocal—even dialectical.

The project of Lyric Histories is to read the ways the lyric form makes both the structure of society and its content visible and legible in new ways. As such, it is founded on a particular narrative of U.S. political and economic history in which a structural of social relations has all but been replaced by a technocratic and ethical account. The terms structural and technocratic will take a number of forms throughout the dissertation. Each time they appear, they denote attention to either form (structure) or content (technocracy). We will see how this works on the economic register in Chapter One. For now, perhaps the clearest way to demonstrate the difference is to examine the shift in voting practices in the U.S. between 1968 and 1972.
The massive political realignment of the white working class in this period is the result of social movements aimed at inclusion (the New Democratic Coalition on the Left) and exclusion (the Southern Strategy on the Right). Following the disastrous 1968 Democratic convention, the New Democratic Coalition (NDC) initiated a number of reforms aimed at producing a more inclusive Democratic Party. The reformers were motivated, as Judith Stein argues, by the belief that “party regulars, not the people, had anointed Humphrey” (52). To make the nomination process more democratic, they introduced “more primaries, popular election of senators, and the direct expressions of public sentiment through referenda, recalls, and the like. With such changes, the citizens, people like themselves, enhanced their own power in politics” (52). As such, while the reforms introduced were structural (the way primaries are run, how delegates are selected for national conventions, and an increasing emphasis on caucuses) structure within the party) their form of appearance was technocratic (who was ultimately in charge of the nominating process). What functioned for some members (women and minorities) as inclusive politics appeared to other members (men and white people) as exclusionary politics. The situation led Ronald Reagan to comment during the 1972 presidential campaign that “[o]ur traditional two-party system has become a three-party system—Republican, McGovern, and Democrat. And, only the first two parties have a Presidential candidate in the coming election. Millions of patriotic Democrats were disenfranchised in the take-over of their convention” (quoted Stein 68). White working class voters were left without a candidate. The Republicans capitalized on the now fragmented Democratic Party, focusing their campaigns on “gut level issues” like “busing, abortion, school prayer, and gun control” in what is now known as the Southern Strategy (Cowie 227). The result was a landslide for Nixon. One way of understanding the difference between the 1964 election, which was a landslide for Democrat Johnson against
Republican Goldwater, and the 1972 election, which produced a landslide in the opposite direction, is recognizing that what motivated voters had shifted from an interest in the structure of American society—which the New Deal Democrats provided—to an interest in the content of American society—who gets what benefits. It goes without saying, as we all prepare for another election cycle, that “gut level issues” continue to dominate U.S. politics. The shift from structure to technocracy, or, in aesthetic terms, from form to content, that the 1972 election represents is formally identical to the formal argument of Lyric Histories, in which two levels of totality—aesthetic totality, produced by the introduction of history into the lyric form, and social totality, in which structure and individuals come into contact—play across the lyric surface.

The first chapter deals with the original “poem containing history,” Ezra Pound’s Cantos. The core of the argument is that we can classify only the first thirty or so of the Cantos as historical. While historical figures continue to populate the Leopoldine, Chinese, and Adams cantos, they do not count as historical because Pound gives up on the category of history altogether. In the earlier Cantos, both the poems themselves and Pound’s theory of history were propelled by the dialectical tension between general historical laws or movements (called the repeats in history) and particular examples that, like the Laocoön statuary, condense a problem into legible form (called the luminous details). The tension between general and particular duplicates the tension between history and lyric described above. In contrast, the Chinese and Adams cantos depend on a cyclical temporality in which history disappears. As a result of this shift, the structural account of aesthetics, politics, and economics that is presented in A Draft of XXX Cantos is replaced by esoteric examples of good and bad monetary policy. The Cantos turn away from structure and toward technocracy, prefiguring the historical shift described above.
In fact, the middle *Cantos* provide us with a new way of understanding this transition. My reading of Pound’s poetry, alongside his economic, political, and anti-Semitic radio addresses of the 1940s uncovers the foundational technocratic logic of both Pound’s monetarism and his anti-Semitism. Pound becomes convinced that the structure of the economy is stable; what is disruptive are the elements inside it (namely, a cabal of Jewish bankers who control the world’s money supply). Pound’s logic is shared by proponents of West German neoliberalism, who wanted to design a government and economy that could not possibly become subject to the anti-Semitic irrationality of Hitler’s National Socialist government. The promise of neoliberalism (both German and American) is that a free market guarantees social equality. But this guarantee is ironically founded on the same logic that led Pound to call for, among other things, the exile of “[t]he sixty Kikes who started” World War II (*Speaking* 115). Further, this logic persists in both Left and Right responses to the Great Recession, all of which produce solutions to broken economic mechanisms at the expense of structural thought.

In the second chapter, we turn Pound’s life-long friend and combatant, William Carlos Williams. Economic material is again central to the poetry, as Williams, in *Paterson IV*, connects Marie Curie’s discovery of radium with the Social Credit movement, an economic program designed to “[l]et credit / out… from between the bars / before the bank windows” by restructuring the American banking system (182). Throughout this section, Williams equates radium’s luminous properties with Social Credit’s promised cure for the economy and the Cold War. The section is much derided in Williams criticism, perhaps because it most clearly bears Pound’s fingerprints. But rather than being a reiteration of Pound’s project, Williams subsumes the scientific and economic content of *Paterson IV* under the development of his formal project: it is not a paean to radium and credit, but the final articulation of the stakes of Williams’s “new
measure,” which “will be commensurate with the social, economic world we are living in as contrasted with the past” (“Field of Action” 53). As I argue here, the historical, scientific, and economic material presented in Paterson is used to revise the work he began in In the American Grain. There, he identified the originary mistake of U.S. culture as the failure of the Old Worlds colonizers to properly synthesize the New World in their settlements. American Grain calls for a relatively simplistic solution—a “new wedding” of the Old and New World that would heal the rift between the two. Paterson offers a more complex diagnosis and prescription. By uncovering how race, gender, and class work together to exclude certain citizens of Paterson, Williams produces an aesthetic form that, by doing away with hierarchy, models a different kind of relationship between the Old and New World, civilization and nature, male and female, center and periphery.

The second half of the book is concerned with the appearance of history after 1968, and specifically concerned with poets whose work appears to be engaged with identity politics, but in fact turns out to be engaged in producing poems that articulate either the present structure of society or the methods by which these structures can be broken. Chapter Three deals with the representation of slavery in the Black Arts Movement, contemporary film, and the poetry of M. NourbeSe Philip. I argue that the militant stance taken in Amiri Baraka’s play Slave Ship, which culminates in race war, persists in the representation of slavery in contemporary films. Slave Ship, 12 Years a Slave, and Django Unchained depict slavery as a system of racism in which slave-owners and –traders are motivated by their hatred for black people. Of course, the contemporary representations of slavery sanitize Baraka’s account of U.S. racism, so that slavery becomes a problem for individuals to overcome rather than a system of economic domination. In contrast, M. NourbeSe Philip’s Zong! makes visible the complex network of legal and economic
systems that not only made the slave trade possible, but also continue to impact the lives of New World Africans.  

3 *Zong!* is constituted by the double meaning of recognition sketched above. On one hand, her reconfiguration of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, the court case that determined the insurance money due a shipping company following the intentional drowning of over 130 men, women, and children bound for the American slave market, gives voice to African captives massacred on the *Zong*. On the other hand, the nexus of law and economics produced in the poem makes the history of colonialism visible and reveals how European society has historically and continues to depend on a violent and extractive relationship with the African continent. This dual process of recognition—the legibility of previously illegible human lives and the condensation of economic and legal history into one event—reveals the way the lyric poem can capture both the structure and content of the social system.

The final chapter turns to the poetry and critical writing of Susan Howe and Lyn Hejinian, read in the context of the politics of Occupy Wall Street. While Howe has long been thought an important, if peripheral, member of the Language writing group, I argue that her poetry is fundamentally opposed to the central beliefs of the Language writers, as it is not interested in the participation of the reader in the meaning of the poem or the participation of the poem in contemporary politics. Lyn Hejinian’s work, in contrast, is designed to develop a quotidian creative practice that merges aesthetics and politics. It is no surprise, then, that Hejinian has been actively involved in and published articles detailing Occupy’s political formation. What is surprising, however, is that the very aesthetic commitments that make Howe appear in opposition to the participatory aesthetics and politics of Occupy entail a far more progressive and utopian vision of the future. Occupy’s politics, as they are popularly understood to depend on the form of occupation as protest, depend on a purely presentist temporality, which
renders it incapable of producing the conditions by which its utopian promise might be fulfilled. It is in Howe’s use of history and her handling of the tensions between form and content, between lyric and narrative, between past and present, that she develops a structural account of aesthetics and politics that can fully register the tensions that created our contemporary crisis and model a temporality that can lead us out.

In the coda to the work, I will provide readings of three recent collections of poetry: Jasper Bernes’s *We Are Nothing and So Can You*, Joshua Clover’s *Red Epic*, and Stephen Collis’s *To The Barricades*. Reading these three works together will demonstrate lyric’s ability to make time—the past, present, and future—appear. The appearance of time in each of these works uncovers the formal identity between contemporary lyric and the structures of finance capital. The shared desire of the poem and capital—“to be form’s content”—functions the final articulation of the stakes of the project: to read poetry is to read capital (*Red Epic* 49).
Notes to Introduction

1 This formulation omits Kristin Ross’s spectacular *The Paris Commune and the Emergence of Social Space*. Originally published in 1988, the introduction positions the work as a major intervention in Marxist literary criticism that had already been ignoring the lyric poem. She writes, “Marxist literary critics from Lukács through Sartre and on up to the current generation—Eagleton, Macherey, and even an occasional critic of poetry… like Frederic Jameson (‘narrative, which I take to be… the central function or instance of the human mind’)—have continued to reassert the traditionally dominant concern with narrative and the novel genre” (11). Further, the Left interest in lyric is just one part of its contemporary resurgence. *PMLA*’s special issue on New Lyric Studies in 2006, anchored by Marjorie Perloff’s presidential address, draws out how poetry offers important and distinct ways of reading. The past two years have seen the mainstream publication of two books about the history of lyric: Virginia Jackson’s and Yopie Prins’s *The Lyric Theory Reader*, which seems specifically designed for adoption in college classrooms, and Jonathan Culler’s *The Theory of Lyric*.

2 This is not to foreclose entirely on narrative. Rob Halpern argues convincingly, in “Narrating the Financialized Landscape: The Novels of Taylor Brady” that many of the techniques described by Jennison and Culler are also at play in Brady’s novels. I would also argue, although I do not have the space to do so here, that Ben Lerner’s *10:04* is an example of a novel that resists narrative structure in a lyrical way. Of course, it’s worth noting that Halpern, Brady, and Lerner are all poets or ex-poets.

3 “New World Africans” is Philip’s moniker for the descendants of slaves. I have adopted here, because her argument extends past the borders of the U.S.
We Are All Pound Now:
The *Cantos* and the Shape of the Economy

In Ezra Pound’s 1944 pamphlet “An Introduction to the Economic Nature of the United States,” he explains that he did not set out to write “the Economic History of the U.S. or any other country.” Instead, he intended “to write an epic poem that begins ‘In the Dark Forest,’ crosses the Purgatory of human error, and ends in the light, ‘fra i maestri di color che sanno.’” For this reason,” he explains, he has “had to understand the nature of error” (*Prose* 137).1 “Economic Nature” was written on the heels of the *Chinese* and *Adams* cantos (Cantos LII-LXXI), a section of the *Cantos* that deals extensively, if not exclusively, with economic history (of the U.S. as well as China and Italy, as we shall see below). The introduction to “Economic Nature,” then seems to offer some contextualization of the long digression into economic history at the center of the *Cantos*, suggesting that Pound understands his economic writings as, in some way, subordinate to or derivative of the central poetic project. That is, as a result of the composition of the *Cantos*_—here explicitly modeled on the *Divine Comedy*—Pound discovered a variety of ways error has been articulated throughout history.2 While “Economic Nature” goes on to identify one historical error—the U.S. government’s adoption of a metallic-backed currency instead of the fiat money commonly used by the colonies in the pre-Revolutionary period—the quote with which I began implies that this is just one expression of “the nature of error.” My contention, however, is that while the description of his project in “Economic Nature” captures the structure of his pre-1940 cantos (Cantos I-LI), the Chinese and Adams cantos (Cantos LII-LXXI) demonstrate that the poetic project had been subsumed by Pound’s economic theories. No longer was the mismanagement of monetary policy one example in the long history of human error; it became the only error.
Pound’s obsession with monetary policy—defined here simply as his interest in the nature of money—is not unique. The dominant economic question of the late nineteenth century was the problem of the gold standard, the consequences of free silver, and the potential of fiat money. There is little doubt that Pound, as a young man, was exposed to these debates. Hugh Kenner argues that Homer Pound’s work at the Philadelphia mint was foundational to young Ezra’s thinking about money: “as a small boy [he] watched his father… assaying gold with an incredibly delicate balance… Gold was romance, was beauty: beauty to adorn Aphrodite, its meaning corrupted by a tangle of fiscal lies” (412–413). As Pound came of age, money continued to be at the center of economic debates. The global economic slow-down between World War I and World War II motivated a number of new monetary theories, including those of C. H. Douglas, which we shall return to at the end of the chapter. For now, it is enough to note that it is not at all surprising that Pound was interested in money: it would have been more surprising if he had found his economic interest elsewhere. What is surprising, however, is that Pound’s attention to money within the Cantos takes the same form as contemporary economic policy and debates. That is, the Cantos are not, as Pound intended, a history of human error; instead, it is the prehistory of the present.

The chapter at hand cannot hope to encompass the Cantos as a whole. When any critic takes on the Cantos, she must face not only the sheer size of it (seven-hundred and seventy pages, without any of the critical apparatus necessary to track down references, quotations, and translations), as well as account for the fact that it was composed over a sixty-year period, in which Pound’s ideas and life changed radically. When the “Ur-Cantos” were published in Poetry in the summer of 1917, Pound still lived in London, reeling from the immense personal loss he suffered as a result of the First World War. By the time Thrones (the last completed installment
of the *Cantos*) was published in 1959, Pound had left England for Italy and joined the fascist party, publicly supported Mussolini (and condemned Franklin Roosevelt) on Italian radio, been incarcerated in a Pisan concentration camp on treason charges then committed to St. Elizabeth’s hospital (in Washington D.C.) with a schizophrenia diagnosis—a diagnosis, it is worth noting, that many critics believe was manufactured to avoid the death penalty—and finally released, returning to Italy to live out the last fourteen years of his life.\(^6\) Simply recounting the historical events Pound lived through—let alone those he attempted to influence—is lengthy work, work that has, fortunately, been almost completed.\(^7\) As such, I will work only on the pre-*Pisan Cantos*, because I believe that is where we can most clearly see the poem’s devolution into a monetarist screed. What began as a poem that contained history turned into a poem that could contain only money; as I will argue, such a change hinges on the revision of Pound’s historical method, which takes place with the introduction of Adonis in Canto XLVII.\(^8\) *A Draft of XXX Cantos*, I argue, is distinct from the later cantos in two important ways. First, it presents a primarily literary history. Second, that history is, in fact, historical.

While the way in which Pound’s attention shifts from a critique of the structures of (primarily artistic) employment to a critique of the creation and distribution to money certainly mirrors one narrative of twentieth century economic thought, the point here is such a shift in attention is in fact demanded by the revision of Pound’s historical method. When Pound replaces Odysseus with Adonis in Canto XLVIII, he a moving, dialectical account of history with a static, cyclical account of history. Locally, I will argue that the turn to cyclical historiography renders the *Chinese* and *Adams* cantos ahistorical. More globally, I will argue that the disappearance of history from the *Cantos* constrains the way Pound can think about the economy. In the final section of the chapter, I will demonstrate that not only do Pound’s economic theories come to
depend on an ahistorical theory of history, but that the neoliberalism that emerged to replace fascist state economics (of which Pound’s theories are an example) also depend on this very absence of the historical. While we are mostly free of the anti-Semitic economics of Pound and his contemporaries—or, if we are not absolutely free of then, we have, at least, successfully shunted them into the margins—I argue that the disappearance of history in economic thought persists, and is still foundational to the most accepted contemporary economics, both capitalist and anti-capitalist.

1. And then

The first thirty cantos follow the expression of one thread of cultural and literary history from ancient Greece through the years just following the American Revolution. They do this by articulating history as a set of general themes (the repeats in history) and particular examples (the luminous details). The pattern is established in the first Canto, which begins with a retelling of Odysseus’s descent to hell (the nekyia episode) via Andreas Divus’s sixteenth century Latin translation of Homer.

The descent to hell appears throughout the Cantos: there is the nekyia, the Inferno, with which this chapter opened, and Pound’s own descent into a contemporary hell, encountering “politicians,” “profiteers,” and “financiers” (XIV/61). As such, it is one example of the repeat in history, modeled on the morphological history of Brooks Adams among others. Morphological history seeks out events, ideas, and problems that seem to recur throughout history. The descent to hell is an example of the morphological structure in cultural history; as we shall see shortly, the relationship between the state apparatus and artists is a repeat in economic history. The repeat in history unifies A Draft of XXX Cantos by establishing a set of themes that will occur with variation in different times and places.
Alongside the repeat in history, often working as its articulation, is the luminous detail: an idea, object, place, or figure that has come down through the historical record and “remain[ed] unaltered” (Prose 23). As Pound explains, each historian will “‘have ideas’… imperfect inductions, varying as the fashions,” but these ideas will not change the luminous detail. The task of the artist, then, is to seek out these artifacts and “present them” (Prose 23). The Homeric diction Pound opens the Cantos with and returns to throughout A Draft of XXX Cantos is one example of the luminous detail. The first lines of the poem are:

And then went down to the ship,
Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and
We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,
Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also (I/3)

Most lines begin with a strong iambic foot (“and then,” “set keel,” “bore sheep”), often followed by an anapest (“to the ship,” “on the god(ly),” “and our bod(ies)”) and a caesura that divides the line in (almost) equal parts. The repetition of b- and s-sounds provides another, competing pattern. Compare the opening lines of The Seafarer:

May I for my own self song’s truth reckon,
Journey’s jargon, how I in harsh days
Hardship endured oft.
Bitter breast-cares have I abided,
Known on my keel many a care’s hold,
And dire sea-surge, and there I oft spent
Narrow nightwatch nigh the ship’s head

This poem also contains strong iambic openings, although usually in the form of a single word (“journey,” “hardship,” “bitter,” “narrow”). It also has the anapentic feet (“in harsh days,” “on my keel,” “a care’s hold,”) and caesuras that mark Canto I. Although not as obvious, lines 4 and 6 show his repeated reliance on b- and s-sounds (“bitter breast-cares,” “sea-surge”).

There is a key difference between these two passages, and it shows Pound’s reliance on the particularity of the luminous detail. The use of pronouns in each translation mirrors their
original language. While the Seafarer gives its pronoun in the first line, Canto I goes without a subject until the third line. Canto I is from a Latin translation of the Odyssey. Verbs in both Latin and Greek contain the person and the number of the subject, so poets would only include a pronoun if it worked to their benefit. The grammar of the Old English in which The Seafarer was written demands that a subject appear with each verb. Pound leaves aspects of these poems “unaltered” even in his English translation.¹²

Pound returns to the Homeric style throughout A Draft of XXX Cantos, using it in many instances to provide relief from the onslaught of quotations and dialect-inflected voices. See, for example, the opening of Canto XVI, after his Dantean foray into hell:

And before hell mouth; dry plain
and two mountains;
On the one mountain, a running form,
and another
In the turn of the hill; in hard steel
The road like a slow screw’s thread,
The angle almost imperceptible. (XVI/68)

The first two words—“and before”—mirror the words with which the Cantos began (“and then”). The opening four lines are fragmented—the caesura is not in the center, but closer to the end. But, in the fifth line, equilibrium returns, along with the now familiar anapests (“in the turn,” “of the hill,” “like a slow”) and s-sounds (“steel,” “slow,” “screw,” “imperceptible.”) After the chaotic, fragmented, and vile hell cantos, this return to the initial style of the poem is a relief. Further, Pound reminds his readers that where we began will be present no matter how far away from the nekyia we find ourselves.

The fact that the repeat in history and the luminous detail that dominate these early sections of the poem are literary elements should signal us to the content of A Draft of XXX Cantos. The path that Odysseus’s nekyia has taken before appearing in Canto I—ancient Greece, then medieval Europe, and now twentieth-century England and the United States—is roughly the
literary and cultural history Pound wants to trace. In this first installment, Pound pauses at Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the erotic poems of Sappho and Catullus, the *chansons* of Piere Vidal and Guillaume de Poitiers, and both Sordello (the troubadour) and *Sordello* (Browning’s poem). These texts—and others—are assembled to reveal the persistence of a particular strain of culture from Greece to the present day.

The Malatesta cantos are a perfect demonstration of Pound’s larger literary historical argument. In the *A Draft of XXX Cantos*, Sigismondo Malatesta functions as waypoint for the cultural tradition Pound is tracing. Lawrence Rainey’s *Ezra Pound and the Monument of Culture* demonstrates, through research into the Pound archives and the primary sources Pound consulted during the composition of the Malatesta cantos, that Pound turned away from the specifically political and economic concerns of Sigismondo’s life, focusing instead on his and his family’s contribution to Renaissance literature. For the first readers of the *Cantos*, Sigismondo would have been best known for remodeling the church of San Francesco in Rimini, or, as it was more popularly known, the Tempio Malatestiano. The story of the Tempio, as told in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century guidebooks, was that Sigismondo dedicated it to his second wife, Isotta degli Atti, in defiance of and as an intended insult to his most formidable enemy: the Catholic Church. As such it was a monument to romance and the power of the individual against large bureaucracies.¹³

Pound does not comment on the controversy over the church. Instead, he uses Sigismondo’s Tempio and love for Isotta as a central link in the lineage between Greece and the present day. He does this by including what he thought was a poem composed by Sigismondo in the troubadour style to honor Isotta:

> “Ye spirits who of olde were in this land  
> Each under Love, and shaken,
Go with your lutes, awaken
The summer within her mind
Who hath not Helen for peer
Yseut nor Batsabe” (VIII/30)

It turns out this was written by Valutri, Sigismondo’s court poet (Rainey 185). Pound would not have had access to this information when he was writing, but it doesn’t really matter whether or not Sigismondo wrote it. What matters to Pound is that he is able to link the poem (and by either direct or indirect association, Sigismondo) to the troubadour tradition. Such a link is the rationale for Pound’s attention to the Malatesta family, as this passage, which appears in the first Malatesta canto and offers a condensed account of the family’s history, attests:

And Poictiers, you know, Guillaume Poictiers
   had brought the song up out of Spain
With the singers and viels. But here they wanted a setting,

... And Mastin had come to Verucchio
   and the sword, Paolo il Bello’s,
caught in the arras
And, in Este’s house, Parisina
Paid
For this tribe paid always, and the house
Called also Atreides’... (VIII/32)

This section alludes to two centuries’ worth of Malatesta family history and almost three thousand years’ worth of literary history. “Mastin” refers to the Old Mastiff, the first of the Malatestas to rule Rimini. He provides the “setting” for Poictiers, a Provençal poet, to bring “the song up out of Spain.” Pound includes two other connections to the Western literary canon: Paolo il Bello—Sigismondo’s cousin, who appears in Canto V of Dante’s Inferno—and Parisina—another cousin and the main figure in a Byron poem. The whole house is “[c]alled also Atreides,” linking the Malatestas to Greece by way of Menelaus and Agamemnon. By emphasizing the family’s place in literary history—and discarding initial drafts that focused on
Sigismondo’s political life—Pound shows that he is making a primarily cultural argument, tracing a particular kind of literary and cultural tradition throughout history.

Although Pound’s primary focus in these early cantos is cultural, he does offer some economic commentary. In the section above, Pound “paid,” repeating it and giving it its own line. Of course when applied to Parisina—who “paid” for her affair with her stepson with her life—it is not economic. But, as we shall see, the statement “this tribe paid always” also describes their relationship to the artists they employed. The Malatesta cantos open with a contract, in the form a letter from Sigismondo to “Giohanni of the Medici,” requesting a “Maestro di pentore” (VIII/28). What is notable about the offer is that the section of the Tempio that Sigismondo wants painted is not yet complete: “[a]s the mortar is not yet dry / . . . it wd. be merely work chucked away” (VIII/28). So, he writes:

But I want it to be quite clear, that until the chapels are ready
I will arrange for him to paint something else
So that both he and I shall
Get as much enjoyment as possible from it (VIII/29)

Despite the fact that the painter cannot work on what Sigismondo has hired him to paint, he should still come and “paint something else” that will give both the painter and Sigismondo “enjoyment.” This respect for and fair treatment of artists is a marker of good leaders throughout the first thirty cantos. In Canto XIII, Pound quotes Confucius: “‘When the prince has gathered about him / ‘All the savants and artists, his riches will be fully employed’” (XIII/59), and, when Thomas Jefferson first appears, it is in the form a letter requesting “a gardener / Who can play the french horn” because “[t]he bounds of American fortune / Will not admit the indulgence of a domestic band” (XXI/97). Sigismondo, as well as being a preserver of the Hellenic tradition, provides an example of the proper relationship between the state and artists. As such, the Tempio functions as a luminous detail that articulates two of the repeats in history in the first
thirty cantos: the cultural legacy that Sigismondo protected and the correct structural relationship between labor and capital.

2. Begin Thy Plowing

The pattern of a general historic theme and a particular articulation of a historic moment is broken in Canto XLVII. At first, this canto, which follows six cantos mostly concerned with banks and banking practices, seems to return to the themes with which we began. We find ourselves with Odysseus as Circe prepares him for the nekyia, advising him “to see Tiresias / Eyeless that was, a shade, that is in hell” (XLVII/236). Rather than revisit the nekyia, however, Pound inserts a new figure: Adonis. As consort of Persephone, Adonis might seem at first to be another figure—like Odysseus, Dante, and Pound—who participates in the descent to hell. But, unlike the others, Adonis’s descent is repeated, not a one-time event. Since he is also the demigod of vegetation, his introduction foreshadows the turn to cyclical time that will come to dominate the proceeding Cantos.17 When Pound replaces Odysseus with Adonis, he replaces the progressive and developmental historical structure he had initially relied on with a cyclical historical structure.

The turn to cyclical history constrains the poem, making it unable to represent change. In the earlier cantos, figures, works of art, buildings, events, and ideas from history appeared “unaltered,” so that when put next to other historical artifacts, their differences and similarities were apparent. While their similarities trace the repeats in history, their differences keep them historical. When, however, Adonis replaces Odysseus and Pound begins to rely on a cyclical calendar, the variations between the luminous details disappear. In fact, as a close look at Pound’s presentation of the Monte dei Paschi will demonstrate, the luminous details begin to merge with the repeats in history.
When the Monte dei Paschi was first introduced, it seemed to serve a function similar to the Tempio. Like the Malatesta cantos, the cantos devoted to the Paschi (XLII-XLIV) begin with a legal document; in this case, with a notarized letter describing how the bank will operate (XLII / 209–210). Again, like the other “unaltered” details from history presented in the first forty cantos, Pound did primary research and included sections of his research in the poem (Marsh 132). But, the introduction to the Paschi should give us pause. He explains that the Paschi is a “species of bank—damn good bank, in Siena” (XLII / 209).18 The turn to species, which denote a kind of generality, indicates that the Paschi will work differently from the other pieces of Italian history we have already encountered.

Pound uses the Paschi—both in the Cantos and his economic writings—to function as a contrast to the other banks—the hell banks. The original capital for the Paschi was provided when Duke Leopold used his grazing lands as collateral; Pound writes, “[t]he CREDIT rests in ultimate on the ABUNDANCE OF NATURE, on the growing grass that can nourish the living sheep” (“Social Credit”). The bank, then, understands that all “value comes from. . . nature” (Prose 264). Unlike the “natural” funding of the Sienese bank, the Bank of England—a prime example of a hell bank—“hath profit of interest on all the moneys which it, the bank, creates out of nothing” (Prose 260, and XLVI/233). Further, the bank distributed its money for the benefit of the Sienese people: “[i]t was not for the conqueror’s immediate short-sighted profit, but to restart life and productivity of Siena, that this bank was contrived… [A]ll excess profit… go[es] to the hospitals and works for the benefit of the people” (“Credit”). In a quote Pound used both in the money pamphlets and the Cantos, the Rothschild firm describes its relationship to its profits: “‘Very few people will understand [the bank’s policies]… Those who do will be occupied getting profits. The general public will probably not see it’s against their interest’” (“Roosevelt,”
and XLVI/233). The problem here is clear. The bank is working against the interest of the people, anticipating that “the general public will… not see” the scheme. Those that do see it will be too “occupied getting profits” to object.

The Monte dei Paschi, the Bank of England, and the Rothschild firm no longer function as luminous details that appear “unaltered” in the present. Rather, Pound has devised two categories (or species) into which he can place “damn good bank[s]” and “hell banks.” They have become transhistorical examples meant to demonstrate the difference between good and bad monetary policies. When we turn to the Chinese and Adams cantos shortly, we will see how the historical ideas, events, and images presented have become transhistorical, plucked from their original contexts, and used as “species” to demonstrate Pound’s theories of government and monetary policy. It is in his condensing of the luminous detail and the repeat in history that Pound removes history from the poem including history.

The point isn’t simply that history has disappeared; rather it is that history takes Pound’s ability to perform a structural critique of the economy with it when it goes. We saw already how, in A Draft of XXX Cantos, Pound provides three examples of different leaders working with artists. The difference between how Sigismondo, Confucius, and Jefferson handle the state’s relationship to art reveals the different economic structures of each time and culture. Sigismondo and his painter negotiate a contract under the auspices of Renaissance patronage; Confucius operates in a feudal system, in which artists are brought to court by rulers; and Jefferson, the most contemporary example, is looking for a horn-player who can garden as well, revealing that the artist must be doubly useful to make a living. The elaboration of a repeat in history through the luminous detail allowed Pound to present ideas without losing their historical context, thus presenting both with the content of the economy—the relationship between rulers and artists or,
more generally, between capital and labor—and its form—patronage, feudalism, and wage labor. When, however, the poem ceases to be historical, the ideas introduced into it—whether they be aesthetic, political, or economic ideas—are removed from their historical contexts. Even if the economic policies he introduces are structural innovations, they are severed from the structure that produced them, and thereby appear as mechanisms within a generalized and unchanging economy.

3. Know Then

The twenty cantos released in 1940 offer two extended historical sequences that are almost entirely derived from two sources: Joseph de Moyriac de Mailla’s *Histoire Général de la Chine* (the basis for Cantos LII-LXI) and John Adams’s *Collected Works* (the basis for Cantos LXII-LXXI). Together, these twenty cantos cover almost five thousand years of history. As David Ten Eyck explains,

> even many of the most sympathetic readers… have been inclined to minimize the importance of these poems. The trajectory of Pound’s career in the late 1930s and 1940s is not uncommonly described in terms of failure and recovery. In this vision, the Adams Cantos represent a poetic dead-end. (1)

Contrary to this view, Ten Eyck argues that the *Chinese* and *Adams* cantos represent the culmination of almost forty years of study begun while at Penn in 1901 and 1902 (14–16).

Further, the texts should be understood as Pound understood them—as an important leap forward in his documentary method (6–7). Ten Eyck argues that, in these later historical cantos, Pound has excised much of the connective tissue that was evident in the earlier cantos. (54–65). As such, Ten Eyck places these cantos in continuity with the earlier ones, arguing that are the full articulation of the historical method Pound intended as the structure of his work. I argue, however, that they represent a definitive break on the level of both form and content, which ultimately changes the kind of political intervention the poem can make.
The *Chinese* and *Adams* cantos offer a long meditation on the practice and development of good government in two very different cultures. In the opening canto, it becomes clear that, at least on Pound’s account, this meditation is central to contemporary politics and economics. The *Chinese* cantos open with reference to the Paschi, immediately contrasted with the hell banks, and then turn to the history of the U.S.

> And I have told you of how things were under Duke Leopold in Siena
> And of the true base of credit, that is the abundance of nature
> with the whole folk behind it
> …
> neschek against this…
> …
> Stinkschuld’s sin drawing vengeance, poor yitts paying for Stinkschuld
> paying for a few big jews’ vendetta on goyim
> …
> remarked Johnnie Adams (the elder)
> IGNORANCE, sheer ignorance ov the natr ov money
> sheer ignorance of credit and circulation.
> Remarked Ben: better keep out the jews
> or yr/ grand children will curse you (LII/257)

“Stinkschuld” originally read “Rothschild,” but Pound’s publishers made him take out the reference (Ten Eyck 6). We will return to Pound’s anti-Semitism in more depth below, but I want to highlight the very National Socialist opposition between the “folk” and the “neschek.”

For now, the essential element of this opening is that Pound frames his long meditation on Chinese history with the history of Siena and the U.S. Following this, the poem changes track radically. A two word line (“Know then:”) precedes a translation of the *Li Ki*, an anthology of Confucian instructions regarding etiquette, administration, agriculture, and so on. We can see immediately that the cyclical sense of time and history described above dominates this section:

> Toward summer when the sun is in Hyades
> …
> to this month are birds.
> …
> In this month no destruction
> no tree shall be cut at this time
Wild beasts are driven from field
in this month are simples gathered. (LII/258)

The Canto goes on like this, assigning certain activities to certain times of year (“Virgo in mid
heaven at sunset / indigo must not be cut / No word burnt into charcoal” [LII/258]; “This month
is the reign of Autumn / Heaven is active in metals, not gather millet / and finish the flood-walls”
[LII/260]). We have moved far afield not only from the opening of this canto, which began with
Pound’s characteristic obsession with international finance and his suddenly very explicit anti-
Semitism, but also from the first thirty cantos. The only mention in Canto LII of the literary and
cultural themes that moved A Draft of XXX Cantos is a cryptic allusion to the relationship
 “[b]etween KUNG and ELEUSIS.” The Canto closes by making its first explicit statement about
good governance, a section that also hints at how Pound understands the relationship between
Chinese history and the larger project. It reads:

…Good sovereign by distribution.
Evil king is known by his imposts. \(^{20}\)
Begin where you are said Lord Palmerston
began draining swamps in Sligo
Fought smoke nuisance in London. Dredged harbour in Sligo. (LII/261)

The first two lines set up a way of measuring good and evil kings, just as the Leopoldine cantos
set up a measure for “damn good” and “hell” banks. A good sovereign distributes; a bad one
taxes. Interestingly, however, this criteria is not, immediately linked to China or the U.S.—his
purported subjects. Instead, he references Lord Palmerston, one of the few British leaders to
appear in the Cantos in a positive light. \(^{21}\) Here, however, Palmerston serves as a cipher for
Mussolini. Pound credits him with “draining swamps” and “dredg[ing the] harbor” at Sligo (an
Irish port city, where the Palmerston family was given peerage in the eighteenth century). No
historical records indicate that Palmerston took on a drainage project, although he did fight the
“smoke nuisance in London,” introducing the Smoke Abatement Act in 1853. Whether or not
Pound made a genuine historical mistake or knowingly fabricated the reference to Sligo is beside the point: what matters is that Palmerston stands in for Mussolini, whose drainage of the Pontine marshes was heralded as evidence of his fitness to lead Italy. What is evident here is that while the subject matter of these cantos may be Chinese and U.S. history, at least part of the point of them is to prove that Mussolini is a “good sovereign.” The references to Mussolini become more and more explicit as the Chinese cantos go on.

In Canto LVI, Pound introduces the Honan city Caï Fong, which was the capital city from 907–960 A.C.E. He explains “in Caï Fong they made a grain dividend / and gave instruction in farming / ploughs, money, ammassi” (LVI/303). “Ammassi” refers, of course, to Mussolini’s ammasso dei prodotti agricoli, a program in which grain was stored and then distributed to the people. Pound refers to it again in Canto LXI, this time with regard to Lieu-yu-yu-yu, an eighteenth century bureaucrat whose handling of a famine brought him to the attention of the emperor. Pound writes:

Lieu-yu-yu-yu, state examiner said
... At moderate price we can sell in the spring
to keep the market price decent
And still bring in a small revenue
which should be used for getting more next crop
AMMASSI or sane collection,
to have bigger provision next year,
that is, augment our famine reserve
and thus to keep the rice fresh in store house.
IN time of common scarcity; to sell at the just price
in extraordinary let it be lent to the people
and in great calamities, give it free (LXI/335)

Throughout the Chinese cantos, then, Pound intends for us to connect the great emperors of China with Mussolini. One of the ways he does this is by transposing Mussolini’s programs into the historical record (crediting Palmerston with drainage programs, naming Chinese grain collection ammassi), a move that renders economic history ahistorical and general.
In the last of the *Chinese* cantos, Pound returns to John Adams:

… Kien Long came to the throne
in the 36th of that century —
and as to the rise of the Adamses —
…
‘Question of coin in these conquered towns is very important.
I advise a few of YOUR mintage
and to leave the old pieces current. (LXI/339)

Kien Long greatly expanded the Chinese empire in the early years of his sixty-year long reign.

What matters to Pound is not the military aspect of the emperor’s rule, but his monetary policy. On Pound’s account, Kien Long was successful because he handled the variety of currencies in his newly conquered lands correctly. This functions, then, as a corollary to “America, Roosevelt, and the Causes of the Present War,” where Pound argues that the real issue that split the American colonies away from Britain was the suppression of local currencies in Pennsylvania and other colonies: “[t]he cardinal fact of the American Revolution of 1776 was the suppression, in 1750, of the paper-money issue” (“Roosevelt”). The connection is furthered by the enigmatic line “and as to the rise of the Adamses—”, which relies on the reader’s knowledge of Chinese and U.S. history. Kien Long became emperor in 1736, one year after John Adams was born.

With this tenuous connection established, Pound moves into the *Adams* cantos.

A long section late in the *Adams* cantos makes the connection between early American economic history, China, and fascist Italy explicit. What seems to be at stake at first is whether or not the new United States will be sufficiently independent of Europe:

France and England wd/ try to embroil us obvious
that all powers of Europe will be continually at manoeuvre
to work us into their real or imaginary balances
of power (LXV/377)

As the section continues, however, we see that the negotiations have more to do with the new government’s ability to conduct successful trade:
That is, the independence being negotiated is economic. If Adams had been unable to secure the “natural right” to fish in the Atlantic, the money the U.S. borrowed from Portugal would simply be redirected to London. With fishing rights in place, money can circulate within the domestic economy, leaving the U.S. outside Europe’s “real or imaginary balances / of power.” Adams’s success ensures “that cash move amongst the people” (LIII/270); it also demonstrates that “the true base of credit… is / the abundance of nature” (LII/257).

The second to last canto in the Adams sections concludes with lines adapted from Adams’s memoir,

After generous contest for liberty, Americans forgot what it consists of
…
that there were Americans indifferent to fisheries and even some inclined to give them away
…
I am for balance (LXX 412–413)\textsuperscript{24}

Next to the statement, “I am for balance,” Pound includes the Chinese character \textit{chung}, which he elsewhere translates as “unwobbling pivot.” “I am for balance” calls back to Adams’s negotiations to keep the United States out of Europe’s “balance of power.” Its placement next to the chung character, however, provides final confirmation of the loss of historical specificity that marks these cantos. In another context, “I am for balance” and chung could function as luminous details: “I am for balance” could be understood as an “unalterable” detail of John Adams’s political beliefs; chung might be an element of Chinese philosophy that has come down through the historical record whole. And, we might read them in the same way we read the statements
regarding the proper relationship between the artist and the state. But, here they are presented as interchangeable, functioning simultaneously as luminous details and repeats in history. Their specificity has been lost and taken history with it.

4. What is Money For?

The chung character has an important resonance with Pound’s economic theories. For Pound, the “unwobbling pivot” of the economy should be money. In his 1939 pamphlet, “What is Money For?” Pound explains that “[m]oney is a measured title or claim” in the same way “a railway ticket is a measured ticket” (*Prose* 260). Just as a railway ticket measures miles, so that you pay more to go from Chicago to San Francisco than from Chicago to St. Louis, Pound thinks money measures value. The difference is that “miles… always stay the same length” while the “money ticket… wobbles” (260). So, the first task of the government—whose “SOVEREIGNTY inheres in the right to ISSUE money (tickets) and to determine the value thereof” (262)—is to create a money ticket that does not wobble: “The U.S. Government has the right to say ‘a dollar is one wheat-bushel thick, it is one serge-foot long, it is ten gallons of petrol wide.’ Hence the U.S. Government could establish the JUST PRICE, and a just price system.” (263). Were readers of the Chinese and Adams cantos caught up with Pound’s prolific output, the appearance of the “unwobbling pivot” at the end of the Canto LXX would have explicitly linked Adams’s political maneuver over fishing rights with Confucian law and contemporary economic problems.

We’ve already encountered pieces of Pound’s economic theory. He believes that the state should support artists, as “[w]hen the prince has gathered about him […] All the savants and artists, his riches will be fully employed”” (XIII/59). Credit, on his account, derives from nature, based “on the growing grass that can nourish the living sheep” (“Credit”) and should benefit the
citizens. The government should distribute money and goods evenly. It is worth exploring these, especially his theory of the distribution of money, in more detail.

Pound’s obsession with the money question was a direct result of his diagnosis of the financial turmoil during the interwar years, which was marked by high inflation and high unemployment. He believed that “the only economic problem needing emergency solution is the problem of distribution” (SP 204). The problem, according to Pound, wasn’t that production couldn’t meet demand—if that were the case, then there wouldn’t be high unemployment accompanying inflation. Rather, he believed, the problem was that those who demanded products couldn’t afford them. In this, he differed from almost all orthodox accounts of the interwar crisis, although mainstream economics would eventually agree with his diagnosis.

For Pound, and many others at the time, C. H. Douglas’s $A+B$ theorem, the central theory of Social Credit, seemed to explain how there could be such an imbalance between production and consumption. As Pound summarizes it in *ABC of Economics*:

- The manufacturer is “paid” in two ways under the present system. He gets “money” or “is owed” money for what he sells, and he gets ability to borrow from banks, *i.e.* his action and potentiality to produce enable him to get credit as well as payments (cash and deferred) and the banks get more credit than they give him, *i.e.* he has to hand part of it back to them… The banks will always give him less than he has to give them. They are not there for their health. The book-keeping cost of the goods is the cost (real) of the goods plus the cost of the money, or the rent of the money. (*Prose* 224)

Douglas’s point was that manufacturers get money from two sources: sales and bank loans. But, for it to be worthwhile for the bank to make loans, they must “get more credit than they give him.” After all, “they are not there for their health.” That is, a bank must charge interest on its loans or else there is no incentive for them to loan out money in the first place. As a result, the product’s price is determined by both the costs of production ($A$) and the interest on the loans ($B$): “[t]he book-keeping cost of the goods is the cost (real) of the goods plus the cost of the
money, or the rent of the money.” Prices are determined by the cost of production plus bank costs: \( A + B \). Wages for workers come out of the A column, so any money paid to the banks (the whole of the B column) does not go to consumers; as a result, prices are inflated by bank loans, and the consumer cannot afford to pay them.

The attention to the banks as the cause of economic instability led many adherents, including C. H. Douglas and Pound, to anti-Semitic economic beliefs. Here, we can try to distinguish between Pound’s cultural anti-Semitism, which he would refer to as “stupid suburban prejudice” in an interview with 1967 with Allen Ginsberg, and his economic anti-Semitism. There is much evidence of cultural anti-Semitism in the Cantos. While his portrayal of Jewish figures is sometimes ambivalent—such as Baldy Bacon of Canto XII, who is (like Odysseus) “polutropon” and the “not totally unsympathetic caricature of Max Beerbohm” from “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” (Casillo 4–5)—one way of understanding the construction of A Draft of XXX Cantos would be to say that what’s left out is just as important as what appears. Those first thirty cantos trace the movement of one strand of culture from Greece to the present day. Certain groups of people and institutions are presented as hostile to the preservation of this tradition: in the Malatesta cantos, for example, it is the Catholic church; in the hell cantos, it is “politicians,” “profiteers,” “financiers,” and “betrayers of language” (XIV/61); and in Canto XVI, which covers World War I, it is, at least partially, the Russian Revolutionaries. But the preservation of the Homeric-Provençal tradition must come at the expense of other traditions: not just the Judaic tradition, but also Catholic and Marxist traditions are excluded and criticized throughout the Cantos.

The Cantos themselves are never as virulently anti-Semitism as Pound’s Radio Addresses. It is there that Pound most clearly connects Jews to usury and calls for their expulsion
from Europe. Some critics believe that even in these radio addresses, Pound uses the term Jew not to refer to an identifiable group, but as a synecdoche for finance capital. For example, he exempts poor Jewish people from his attacks, cautioning listeners not to “start a pogrom” unless one can be devised that starts “UP AT THE top.” Instead, he suggests that “[t]he sixty Kikes who started this war” be exiled along with “some hyper-kike, or non-Jewish kikes” (“Speaking” 115). But, Pound’s own statements about this relationship point more to the anti-Semitic reading than the anti-finance reading. In a 1942 broadcast, he announces, “Your enemy is Das Leihkapital, international, wandering Loan Capital… The big Jew is so bound up with this Leihkapital that no one is able to unscramble that omelet” (59). That is, if there ever was a distinction between the financiers and Jews, it is no longer possible to find it. Or, as Anthony Daniels explains, by the early 1940s “Pound came to believe that the class of parasitic exploiters was co-terminous with the class of Jews” (34). And, likewise, no one is really able to unscramble the omelet that Pound himself made, where his anti-Semitism becomes bound up in the Cantos, Money Pamphlets, and radio addresses.

They are inseparable because economic anti-Semitism is the reductio ad absurdum of the prevailing economic logic in these mid-period Cantos and economic writings. To put it more clearly, economic anti-Semitism is technocratic thinking taken to its extreme. We have seen already how, in the Chinese and Adams cantos, Pound’s attention shifts from the kind of structural changes advocated in A Draft of XXX Cantos to the mechanisms—such as the creation of money and distribution of grain—within the economy. As Casillo notes, Pound’s critique of capitalism is rather minor: “[h]e rarely considers the exploitation of labor by the industrial capitalist, discounts class domination and warfare, and basically opposes the Marxist theory of surplus value” (191–2). Instead, he distinguishes between those who produce and those who
exploit. As we saw in the Malatesta cantos, this distinction can produce a structural critique. But once it becomes inseparable with the identification of a group of people—so that all Jews are exploiters and all exploiters are Jews—then the remedy is not structural, but technocratic. That is, what it is concerned with is not the shape of the economy, but its content. And Pound’s concern with the content of the economy has become the only economic concern today.

4. We Are All Pound Now

In 1966, Milton Friedman penned a famous, and often misattributed, letter to *Time* magazine; despite his insistence that fiscal intervention into markets was not the cure for, but in fact the cause of, economic instability, Friedman declared “We are all Keynesians now.”\(^2\) This was not an admission of defeat, but rather a description of the ground of economic theory at the tail-end of the post-war boom. I want to close this chapter by suggesting that a better way of understanding the history of economic theory and policy in the twentieth century is by mapping it onto the shift evident in the form and content of the *Cantos*. As I argued above, Pound’s replacement of Odysseus with Adonis is Canto XLVIII gives up on both history and a structural critique of the economy. What is left, and what the *Adams* and *Chinese* cantos are devoted to, is locating mechanisms in economic history—ammasssi, the just price—and replicating them in the present. One way to describe this shift is a move from a structural critique, which got at the forces that the economy, and a technocratic critique, which gets at the mechanisms within the economy. This shift to technocracy is the story of global economic history in the twentieth century.

As I will argue, such a shift depends on not only a refusal to consider the structure of the economy—or, to put it more concretely, the relationship between capital and labor—but also on a refusal to consider history. To get to this big finish, we must see the ways in which Pound’s
economic theories appear not only in the anti-Semitic politics and economics of Nazi Germany, but how they are both refuted and transformed in neoliberal responses to Nazism. What unites them is the refusal of structural analysis. After that, we will turn to two contemporary articulations of economic policy that seem as though they could have been written by Ol’ Ez himself.

Economic anti-Semitism made sense as a response to the economic crisis that plagued Europe, especially Germany, between the World Wars. Lacking a structural account for the high inflation and high unemployment that plagued Germany as a result of the sky-high reparations demanded by France, Germany needed a scapegoat. The Young Plan, a 1929 revision of the Germany’s reparation payment schedule, was called “a ‘Jewish machination’ and a ‘product of the Jewish Spirit’” in Nazi propaganda (Ahamed 395). Although at this point the Nazi Party was nationally mostly powerless—occupying only twelve seats in the Reichstag and having won less than three percent of the vote—it was on the rise. In the 1930 elections, just two years after their poor showing, they won 107 seats. Liaquat Ahamed explains that “Hitler appealed across class lines, promising to reunite the nation, rebuild its position in the world, and purge the country of profiteers” (400). Outgoing president of the Reichsbank Horace Schacht declared in an interview with the New York Times that “[i]f the German people are going to starve, there are going to be many more Hitlers” (quoted Ahamed 402). What Hitler’s anti-Semitism provided the German citizenry was someone to blame for their economic problems.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno offer a devastating critique of the relationship between capitalist instability and anti-Semitism in “Elements of Anti-Semitism.” One section of their analysis reads like a revision of Douglas’s A + B theorem:

The factory owner has his debtors, the workers… They [the workers] only find out the true nature of the exchange only when they see what they can buy with it:
the smallest magnate has access to a quantity of services and goods available to no ruler before him; but the workers receive what is called the cultural minimum. Not content with letting the market tell them how few goods can be theirs, the salesman sings the praises of those they cannot afford. Only the relationship of wages to prices expresses what is withheld from the workers. With their wages they have accepted the principle of just remuneration. (142)

Like Pound, Adorno and Horkheimer note the disparity between what the workers earn and what they are able to buy. However, rather than locating instability and injustice in the relationship between workers and their pay, as the A + B theorem does, they write that such a world view is “a socially necessary illusion,” providing an outlet for workers’ frustration at their structural conditions that is insulated from the actual structures that allow “the smallest magnate… a quantity of services and goods available to no ruler before him” and the worker only the “cultural minimum” (142–43).

They go on that while Jews are not “the only people active in the circulation sphere… they had been locked up in it” for so long that hatred of the sphere of circulation (or distribution) turned into hatred for Jews (143). Or, more succinctly, the Jew “is indeed the scapegoat, not only for individual maneuvers and machinations but in the wider sense that the economic injustice of the whole class is attributed to him” (142). What Horkheimer and Adorno reveal about the economic hatred of Jews is that it is a misrecognition of structural problems: because the Germans could not see the sphere of circulation, which was the cause of their misery, they hated the representatives of it—the Jews.

The style of neoliberalism that emerged after the war in Germany—similar to but importantly distinct from the American neoliberalism we shall turn to shortly—was, in many ways, a response to the violent brutality of the Nazi state. But, as I shall argue here, it continues the trend of failing (or refusing) to recognize the structural instability of the economy. In his 1978–79 lectures, Michel Foucault argues that the Freiburg School of economics, out of which
German neoliberalism emerged, defined themselves against the Nazi state. The prevailing view was that the Nazi economy had combined “heterogeneous” elements of state intervention into the economy—protectionism, state socialism, a planned economy, and fiscal stimulus packages—into a “monstrosity” of an economy (Foucault 109). The Freiburg School, in contrast, argued that those elements are in fact homogenous, all of a kind, and all “economically linked,” so that “if you adopt one… you will not escape the other three” (110). That is, the adoption of any element of state intervention leads us down the slippery slope to Nazism: Godwin’s law in 1945.

As such, the target of the Freiburg School’s attack was not on the structures of the economy, but on the structural relationship between the state and the economy. Foucault summarizes the Freiburg position:

[S]ince Nazism shows that the defects and destructive effects traditionally attributed to the market economy should instead be attributed to the state… [o]ur question should not be: Given a relatively free market economy, how should the state limit it to as to minimize its harmful effects? We should reason completely differently and say: Nothing proves that the market economy is intrinsically defective since everything attributed to it as a defect and as the effect of its defectiveness should really be attributed to the state. So, let’s do the opposite and demand even more from the market economy. (116)

Locating the site of irrationality in the state, as opposed to the economy, led them to the conclusion that the best possible relationship between the social and the economic is “a state under the supervision of the market” (116).29

While there are important distinctions between the Freiburg School of German neoliberalism and the Chicago School of American neoliberalism, they share a belief in the market as the best supervisor of the social. Milton Friedman repeats many of the claims Foucault attributes to the Freiburg School in Capitalism and Freedom. Perhaps the most striking is the way he demonstrates that the Nazi state functions as exemplary of the wrong relationship
between the state and the economy. Regarding Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC), he writes:

FEPC legislation involves the acceptance of a principle that proponents would find abhorrent in almost every other application. If it is appropriate for the state to say that individuals may not discriminate in employment because of color or race or religion, then it is equally appropriate for the state, provided a majority can be found to vote that way, to say that individuals must discriminate in employment on the basis of color, race, or religion. The Hitler Nuremberg laws and the laws in the Southern states imposing special disabilities upon Negroes are both examples of laws similar in principle to FEPC. (113)

To summarize: any state activity that tells the market how to operate is “similar in principle” to Nazism. Further, we see here the way that irrationality is attributed to the state, rather than the market: to enact something like the Nuremberg laws or the FEPC, one must only find “a majority… to vote that way.”

It is the social that introduces irrationality into the market, not the market that introduces irrationality into the social.

So, what to do about those “laws in the Southern states”? The answer is familiar to everyone with a passing understanding of the Chicago School’s economic theories. A functioning and competitive market will do away with discrimination. Friedman writes, “discrimination against groups of a particular color or religion is least in those areas where there is the greatest freedom of competition” (109). This is because a capitalist “who expresses preference in his business activities that are not related to productive efficiency is at a disadvantage compared to other individuals who do not” (109). In a deeper analysis of the same issue, Gary Becker demonstrates that “discrimination harms… capitalists” (13–14). If the state were to stay out of the market, the most appalling expressions of social irrationality in the twentieth century—Nazism and Jim Crow—would disappear.

While this seems very distinct from Pound’s economic beliefs, which, after all depend on the strong hand of fascist leader, they in fact depend on the same disappearance of history. We
saw already the way that the *Chinese* and *Adams* cantos discard historical particularity to demonstrate a continuum of good governance from 2700 BCE to 1940 ACE. Likewise, Becker describes the economic model that demonstrates that “discrimination harms... capitalists” like this: “Government and monopolies are ignored for the present, as the analysis is confined to perfectly competitive societies” (11–12). One way of understanding this would be to say that for Becker to mathematically demonstrate the harmful effects of discrimination on capitalists, he must insulate the market from society. Imagining a perfectly competitive market is utopic thinking, one that can only work if the past—in the form of Nazism or slavery—is “ignored for the present.”

More abstractly, we can say that both Pound and the neoliberals discard structural development and intervention. For Pound, this is demonstrated in his rejection of the dialectic between the luminous detail and the repeat in history, captured when Pound replaces Odysseus with Adonis in Canto XLVIII. For the neoliberals, it can be seen in the difference between the Keynesian interventions of the New Deal and the neoliberal analysis of the Great Depression (or, as Milton Friedman called it, the Great Contraction).

Keynes’s interventions are well known, but it is worth pausing to understanding why they count as structural—rather than technocratic—interventions. To put it simply, Keynes’s interventions require that the “market [be] supervised by the state” (Foucault 116). For example, one of the most famous programs within the New Deal was the Tennessee Value Authority, which, among other things, provided free electricity to the Tennessee Valley while providing work for the unemployed. Rather than relying on the market to create demand for better infrastructure, which would only be effective if residents of the Valley had the money to pay for their demands, the government intervened between capital and labor, producing its own demand.
The TVA and programs like it alter the structure of the relationship between capital and labor. Further, the TVA demands that its designers make a choice: the Tennessee Valley, not the Ohio Valley, not Death Valley, not the Bitterroot Valley. In contrast, a neoliberal orientation moves decision-making to the market and primarily the consumer—as it is in Friedman’s tie metaphor. That is, the neoliberal account has it that the basic structure of the market is both functional and preferable to other structures.

This is evident in Friedman’s analysis of the Great Depression.

Keynes and most other economists of the time believed the that Great Contraction occurred despite aggressive expansionary policies by the monetary authorities—that they did their best but their best was not good enough. Recent studies have demonstrated that the facts are precisely the reverse: the U.S. monetary authorities followed highly deflationary policies. The quantity of money in the United States fell by one-third in the course of the contraction. And it fell not because there were no willing borrowers—not because the horse would not drink. It fell because the Federal Reserve System forced or permitted a sharp reduction in the monetary base, because it failed to exercise the responsibilities assigned to it. (“Monetary Policy” 3)

Friedman’s central claim is that Keynes misunderstood the government’s response to the Great Depression. The argument can be found in greater depth in one of his central contributions to the history of economics, 1963’s *Monetary History of the United States*, which he summarized thusly in 1967: “[e]very… major contraction in this country has been either produced by monetary disorder or greatly exacerbated by monetary disorder” (12). We can see immediately the extent to which Friedman and Pound agree—both think the money supply is central to the
economy’s stability and both believe that, with the right mechanisms, the economy will remain stable. Beyond the similarity in the content of the economic theories, however, is the similarity in their forms: for both Pound and Friedman, the basic structure of the economy is sound, interrupted by broken or failing mechanisms that need to be replaced.

The United States government’s response to the 2008 crash reveals precisely how committed economists and politicians are to Friedman, and how far we’ve moved away from a Keynesian framework. In his 2002 address at the Conference to Honor Milton Friedman, Ben Bernanke—then a member of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve—provided that he, at least, was no longer a Keynesian. He said, “I would like to say to Milton[…] Regarding the Great Depression. You’re right, we did it. We’re very sorry. But thanks to you, we won’t do it again.” While there have been a wide variety of government interventions into the market—most notably, the $700 billion authorized TARP funds and the 2008 and 2009 stimulus packages—their aim has consistently been to increase businesses’ and consumers’ access to money. In initial responses to the crash, in fact, economists, public servants, and workers within the financial sector almost universally worried over the market’s ability to provide credit to those who rely on it. In testimony before the Senate Banking Committee on September 23rd, 2008, Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke said, “the financial markets… are not serving the necessary function to support the economy. Credit is not being provided.” Similarly, in an interview on This American Life (aired October 3rd, 2008) veteran trader Paul Balika said, “how does capitalism work if you can’t borrow money? You’re back to bartering pretty much.” The attention to money and credit indicates that the response has been purely technocratic, apolitical, and, thus, is identical in form to Pound’s solution to the economic turmoil of the early twentieth century.
But activists on the other side are also identical in form to Pound. On the second anniversary of the establishment of Occupy Wall Street’s camp in downtown Manhattan’s Zuccotti Park, an off-shoot of the group, the Occupy Money Cooperative, launched a fundraising campaign to support their pre-paid debit card. For the founders and some commentators either directly involved with or reporting on the movement, the Cooperative appeared as a “deepening” of the ideals of the movement; the card took what was ephemeral about the two-month occupation and concretized (or, rather, plasticized) it. As founder Carne Ross explained in an interview with Dazed Digital, “the whole thing absolutely embodies what Occupy’s all about.” Under one interpretation of the group’s goals and ideals—goals and ideals that are famously undefined—Ross is correct. The Occupy movement has two foundational concerns: growing income inequality (which was sloganized into “We Are the 99%”) and the government’s failure to properly regulate the banks or appropriately respond to the financial malfeasance that all but destroyed the global economy in 2008. The first is seen as a direct result of the second, and the Occupy Money Cooperative attempts to respond to both. Income inequality is addressed by reducing fees on banking, which would allow anyone, regardless of income level, to become a member of the Cooperative. As members, they would vote on all decisions made by the bank, including how members’ money is invested. The implication is that a member-run bank will not participate in the illegal, unethical, or risky financial deals that led up to the 2008 crash.

Or, to put it in Pound’s language, “Banks differ in their intention. Two kinds of banks stand in history. Banks built for beneficence, for reconstruction; and banks created to prey on the people” (“Credit”). The Occupy Money Cooperative imagines itself as a “bank built for beneficence.” The entailment of this shared premise is that reforming a bank’s “intention” can eliminate economic inequality. To believe this, we must believe that economic inequality is not
caused by the structure of the economy, but by a certain segment of the population that has learned to manipulate the economy in their favor. It is not a critique of economics, but a critique of humanity. It is this belief—that economic reform depends upon the improvement of humanity—where the similarity between the Occupy Money Cooperative and Pound takes on new import. While their agreement about the ethics of banking is no revelation to anyone familiar with both, what is likely a surprise is that this agreement rests on the same premise as neoliberalism. The sorts of solutions offered by both neoliberal economists and the Cooperative are technocratic solutions, aimed at repairing broken, malfunctioning, or misused mechanisms within the economy.

While it isn’t surprising that Friedman and those who have followed him are thoroughgoing capitalists, what is likely surprising is that they are capitalists in precisely the same way Pound was a capitalist. That is, both Pound and Friedman’s solutions to economic problems are technocratic, not political. Even more surprising, then, is that self-appointed members of the Occupy movement would rely on the same form as Friedman and Pound. While Pound initially described the structure of capitalist labor relations through luminous details such as the Tempio Malatestiano, he eventually abandoned that structure and attended only to the more local problem of the creation and distribution of money. The problem with believing the problems in our economy are mechanical is that it means we no longer require political solutions to economic problems. If we believe that there are no “internal contradictions” in government or the economy, then the only solutions available can be found within the existing structure. The solution can be found in mechanisms imminent to capitalism, whether they be fiscal or monetary solutions. It’s not, as Friedman suggested almost fifty years ago, that “we are all Keynesians
now”; nor is it, as Bernanke promised, that “we’re very sorry, … we won’t do it again”: instead, we are all Pound now.
Notes to Chapter 1

1 I have preserved the idiosyncrasies of Pound’s spelling, capitalization, and grammar throughout and will refrain from adding [sic] to each example. The phrase “fra i maestri di color che sanno” can be translated “among the masters of those who know”; it is a variation on “maestro di color che sanno,” which appears in Canto IV of the Inferno, when Dante and Virgil encounter the virtuous pagans.

2 There has been spirited debate about which works the Cantos most closely resembles, which works Pound took inspiration from, and which works should be most seriously considered in conjunction with the Cantos. Canto I, of course, starts with Homer. In “Economic Introduction,” Pound is clearly thinking of his project in terms similar to The Divine Comedy. David Moody claims that “Dante…was…his main source of guidance throughout the Cantos” (22). Peter Nicholls, in contrast, understands it more productive to put the Cantos next to Sordello (39). Certainly the “Ur-Cantos,” published in 1917 and containing a long meditation on Browning’s composition of Sordello, lend credibility to Nicholl’s claim. Likewise, Leon Surette writes Sordello influenced Pound’s “formulation of the dynamics of human history” (13). There is no clear way to decide whether or not Pound thought of the Cantos as more closely related to Sordello, the Divine Comedy, or The Odyssey, as all three appear both by allusion and name throughout the poem and in Pound’s prose.

3 For an extended reading of the phenomenon in late nineteenth-century American literature, see Walter Benn Michaels, The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism.

4 Robert Casillo in The Genealogy of Demons writes that “while it impossible to deny [Pound’s] affinities with Populism,” the political party most associated with the anti-gold movement of the late nineteenth century, it did not completely appeal to him: “Pound could not have truly admired the anti-intellectualism, anti-elitism, and anti-Europeanism which typifies…Populism (381).

5 Poetic evidence of Kenner’s claim can be found in Canto XIV, one of the hell cantos, where Pound describes the “perverters of language” as those “who have set money-lust / Before the pleasures of the senses” (XIV/61).

6 See Karen Leick and Matthew Feldman for more on Pound’s diagnosis.

7 Stephen Sicari notes that the Cantos are, in this respect, “extraordinary.” By so closely linking the poem with contemporary politics, Sicari argues, “the poem’s success or failure…[was] tied to the success or failure of a man whose political future [was] very much open to the fortune of events. Pound opened his poem to contemporary politics in an unprecedented way in an effort to make his poem capable of intervening in current events, attempting to meld and shape them” (125).

8 Pound’s famous description of the Cantos as “an epic poem containing history” first appears in the 1934 pamphlet “Date Line,” but is repeated and varied throughout his prose of the 1930s and 1940s.

9 There is no descent into hell in the Chinese and Adams cantos. The Pisan Cantos open with reference to the Odyssey and Canto I.

10 Adams’s The Law of Civilization and Decay (a text Pound recommended to friends in his letter and to his readers in “An Introduction to the Economic Nature of the United States,” the Pisan Cantos, and his radio addresses) is based on the belief that history “fell into a series which seemed to correspond, somewhat closely, with the laws which are supposed to regulate the movements of the material universe” (viii). Specifically, Adams argued that civilizations could be understood most effectively by applying laws about the conservation and dissipation of energy. He argued that two main emotions ruled civilization: fear and greed. Fear causes people to come together, their collective energy coalescing into a nation. Adams argued that fear, however, inevitably gives way to greed; at this point, a nation enters its economic stage, which eventually results in the complete dissipation of the initial organizing energy. In The Law of Civilization and Decay, he applied his theories to the Roman empire, the Catholic church and European monarchies, and finally, to modern civilization. Adams was just one of many historians arguing for a morphological conception of history based on general laws. Oswald Spengler’s The Decline of the West
is a perhaps more famous example. Marx, in “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” credits Hegel with a similar theory—summarizing it thusly: “Hegel remarked somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.” Slavoj Žižek picked up Marx’s aphorism as the title for his book on the 2007 financial crisis, First as Tragedy, Then as Farce. Marx’s reading of Hegel here is too pithy—while Hegel did believe that there is a central dialectical tension in civilization and world history between the idea of freedom and the actions of man, there is no evidence that he believed history repeated itself precisely twice. Giovanni Arrighi’s The Long Twentieth Century performs a better version of the Hegelian repeat, as it understands history as shaped by a dialectic encapsulated in Marx’s general formula of capital. We will encounter Arrighi again in Chapter Three.

11 The language here “present them” should bring to mind Pound’s “A Brief Guide to Imagism,” in which the first of three main principles of the movement is “[d]irect treatment of the thing.”

12 Pound’s attention to language derives from his studies in philology. Although he found himself frustrated by the limits imposed on him by the philological tradition, his interest in linguistics continued. In fact, the relationship between the repeat in history and the luminous detail is mirrored in his theory of language. The ideogram, which would eventually become a key element of the poems themselves, is a corollary to the luminous detail. In the first section of Pound’s ABC of Reading (1934), he describes the main difference between the Romance languages and Chinese. He writes, “[i]n Europe, if you ask a man to define anything, his definition always moves away from the simple things that he knows perfectly well, it recedes into an unknown region, that is a region of remoter abstraction. Thus if you ask him what red is, he says it is a ‘colour’” (19). European thought is inductive: it takes a specific example (red) and moves to the general idea (color). In contrast, Pound argues, if you were to ask a Chinese person what red is, he will produce an ideogram that contains the “abbreviated pictures” of rose, cherry, iron rust, and flamingo (22). The ideogram, then, is not inductive (moving from the specific to the general, from red to color) but deductive (moving from the general to the specific, from red to rose, cherry, iron rust, and flamingo). Just like the luminous detail, the ideogram resists inductive reasoning. The Spirit of Romance (1910) presents the ideogram’s other and the corollary to the repeat in history. There, Pound writes that “the Romance tongues, Provençal, Italian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Catalan, Roumanian and Romansch were . . . ways of speaking Latin somewhat more corruptly than the Roman merchants and legionnaires spoke it” (Romance 2). Pound’s understanding of the relationship between these languages—repetitions with variation, just like the repeat in history—allowed him, in Hugh Kenner’s words, to understand “languages in constant change. . .[,] to think of people speaking them, singing them, thinking in them” (112). Kenner explains that Pound understands languages to be a reflection of the lives of those who speak it; small variations in dialects therefore point to variations in the lives of speakers. Kenner describes Pound’s logic: “[w]ords characterize languages, languages are discriminated phases of Language; Language is the total apprehension, in time and space, of the human mind” (120). That is, Pound uses inductive reasoning to get from language to the human mind, from the particular word to the general principle that holds it together, which is—as is evident in Pound’s description of both the ideogram and Romance languages—human thought. Initially, then, Pound understood language in much the same terms as he understood history: composed of the dialectical relationship between the general (the repeat in history or Language) and the particular (the luminous detail or the ideogram).

13 Rainey also offers a detailed and compelling account of how the Tempio was marshaled in Italian political history. In fact, the Malatesta family was central to Italian social life and politics through the Second World War: Antonio Belltramelli, a key source for Pound, explicitly linked the Malatestas with Mussolini.

14 Rainey notes that Draft B of the Malatesta cantos has a more explicit link between Sigismondo and the Provençal troubadour Rainbaut (38–39).

15 Pound believed that Mussolini appreciated the arts because, upon reading A Draft of XXX Cantos, Mussolini declared them “amusing.” This remark opens Canto XLI: “‘Ma questo, / said the Boss, è divertente” (XLI/202).

16 The proper relationship between artists and the state that Pound describes in A Draft of XXX Cantos is, at its heart, a critique of contemporary structures of patronage. Pound had found his own patron in Margaret Cravens, who began sponsoring Pound’s work at £200 per year in 1910 (Moody 124–25). In a 1922 circular written for Le Bel
Esprit, he proposed a rotating scholarship fund for poets who wished to concentrate on their art without concern for financial stability.

17 Already in Canto XLVII, Pound includes these lines—“Begin thy plowing / When the Pleiades go down to the rest”—from Hesiod’s Works and Days (XLVII/237). As we shall see shortly, the Chinese cantos open with the Li Ki, a text that, like Works and Days, lays out agricultural work by the yearly calendar.

18 Had Pound lived long enough, even his one good bank would have disappointed him. From 2000 to 2006, following its debut on the Italian Stock Exchange, the Monte dei Paschi pursued an aggressive expansion strategy, buying up competing banks within Italy and the EU and opening new branches. To pay for the expansion, the bank hid two derivatives: Santorini and Allesandro. The Monte dei Paschi was hit hard by the 2008 financial crisis, posting losses of around two billion dollars. The real problem came, however, when the Santorini and Alessandra derivatives (which had relatively minor losses) were revealed to the public. As a result of the hidden transaction, bank stock fell twenty-two percent in three days. The Bank of Italy provided more than five billion dollars in bailout funds to keep the bank afloat. Pound would certainly have argued that the Monte dei Paschi’s decision to move away from the traditional basis of the bank—natural credit and public works—was the direct cause of its failure.

19 One explanation for why these cantos were so poorly received is in how Pound organized them. De Mailla’s history of China is chronological, and Pound follows that structure in the Chinese cantos. John Adams Works, however, are arranged by subject: biography, diary, autobiography, political writings, letters, and so on (see Ten Eyck 3 for a detailed table of contents). Pound again followed the structure of the original. As such, when the work appears in the Cantos, it does not proceed through Adams’s life, but skips around. This has been seen as evidence that Pound wrote these poems quickly, did not fully understand the material, and did not devote time to revision.

20 These lines are adapted from Tseng’s commentary on Confucius’s Ta Hsio (The Great Digest): “The humane man uses his wealth as a means to distinction, the inhumane becomes a mere harness, an accessory to his takings” (Cookson 82).

21 Palmerston appeared first in Canto XLII, supporting the Union over the Confederacy in the Civil War.

22 Pound mentions Mussolini’s drainage project in Canto XLI.

23 He does mention the more accepted rationale for the Revolutionary War in Canto LXIII: “parliament / hath no authority / to impose internal taxes upon us” (LXIII/356).

24 As we shall see in the next chapter, William Carlos Williams and Pound agree that the American Revolution did not achieve the freedom it sought. Pound, of course, attributes this to the government’s poor monetary policies; Williams will argue that it failed because of the government’s unwillingness to “touch” the New World.

25 It’s important to distinguish the twin unemployment and inflation of the interwar years from the same phenomena in the late 1970s. High inflation in Europe was produced by the redistribution of gold reserves during World War I. France, Germany, and the U.K. responded to the situation in radically different ways: Germany, of course, printed reams of new money in an attempt to keep up with payments on both war debt and reparations. The U.K., in contrast, purposefully devalued their money by re-establishing the gold standard at a lower parity rate. France, which took the middle way, had the lowest inflation of any nation. The U.S. experienced some inflation, but that was due to the influx of gold from the European nations. Unemployment was not a problem in the U.S. until after the 1929 market crash. In Germany and the U.K., however, the increase in prices due to inflation decreased demand, which led to increased unemployment. Liaquat Ahamed’s Lords of Finance offers a clear history and explanation of the different cause of financial disruption in these four countries.

26 A persistent them in Pound’s poetry and prose is the idea that banks are the direct cause of war. In “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly,” the soldiers in World War I went off “believing in old men’s lies, then unbelieving / came home… / … / home to old lies… // usurpy age-old and age-thick” (11–15); in Canto XVIII, Mr. Giddings explains that universal peace is impossible, as long as “yew got tew billions ov money… invested in the man-u-facture / ‘Of war.
machinery” (XVIII/81). Pound’s theory is fully expressed in 1944’s pamphlet “America, Roosevelt, and the Causes of the Present War, where he writes, “[w]ars are provoked in succession, deliberately, by the great usurers, in order to create debts, to create scarcity so that they can extort the interest on these debts, so that they can raise the price of money” (“Roosevelt”). He singles out certain periods of American history as moments at which the dominance of the hell banks was challenged. Even the Civil War, which Pound admits evoked the same “elements of ‘conscience’ and ‘idealism’” as World War II (although it is not clear whose conscience, the Allies’ or Axis’s, he refers to), was primarily about money: “[t]he aim of the Civil War was unmasked in an issue of the Hazard Circular in 1862: … It will not do to allow the greenback… to circulate” (“Roosevelt”). (There is a bit of an historical mistake here—the greenback did not exist before 1862, so while its circulation certainly was an issue after the war, it cannot be considered the cause of the war.)

27 Although Keynes and Friedman are often described as holding mutually exclusive views about the best way to manage an economy, the distinction between them is not as clear. Both believe in governmental intervention. A better way to understand the history of twentieth century economics is to understand, as Nicholas Wapshott does, Friedrich von Hayek as Keynes’s other. Friedman came, perhaps, too late—after we were all already Keynesians—to truly oppose the Keynesian system.

28 Of course, this was predicted by John Maynard Keynes in The Economic Consequences of the Peace. Published in 1919, Keynes argued that the reparations were so high that forcing Germany to pay them would stall the world markets.

29 Foucault also argues in this chapter that the Freiburg School and the Frankfurt School share a common problem they are trying to solve. Both are invested in resolving the “irrational rationality of capitalist society” (105). There are two ways of approaching this problem. The first, and this would be the force of the section title “Limits of Enlightenment” in The Dialectic of Enlightenment where Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s essay on anti-Semitism appears, is to “determine what new social rationality could be defined and formed in such a way as to nullify economic irrationality” (106). As we saw above, the essay is concerned with understanding how an economic problem—insufficient wages—turns into a social problem—anti-Semitism. The second approach, and the one the Freiburg School took, is to “define, or redefine, or rediscover…, the economic rationality that will make it possible to nullify the social irrationality of capitalism (105–6). That is, German neoliberalism after World War II is an attempt to find the economic system that will guarantee social stability. To summarize their differences in a way that oversimplifies both: the Frankfurt School located capitalist irrational rationality in the economy; the Freiburg School located it in the social.

30 Earlier in the text, Friedman explains that while “action through political channels… tends to require or enforce substantial conformity… the market… permits wide diversity… Each man can vote, as it were, for the color of tie he wants and get it; he does not have to see what color the majority wants and then, if he is in the minority submit” (15). That is, while a nation can only have one president, its citizens can have unlimited consumer choices.

31 Both stimulus packages offered tax rebates and incentives for businesses and consumers. While such policies initially seem to offer a political response to the crisis, their primary goal was not to fund government make-work and welfare programs, but to put money in the hands of consumers, rendering them both primarily technocratic solutions. The 2009 stimulus package (the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act) did provide extra funding for health care, education, and infrastructure and transportation improvements. The political stimulus elements—such as funding green energy research—have consistently been the most controversial parts of the packages.

32 This distinction is worth making considering Friedman’s 2003 interview with Simon London, where he stated “[t]he use of quantity of money as a target has not been a success.”
“The Dissonance is in Discovery”:

Marie Curie, Social Credit, and the New Measure

Money: Uranium (bound to be lead)
throws out the fire
the radium’s the credit […]

…

Money sequestered enriches avarice, makes poverty: the direct cause of disaster
while the leak drips

Let the fire out, let the wind go!
Release the Gamma rays that cure the cancer
the cancer, usury. Let credit
out . out from between the bars
before the bank windows (181–82)

The middle section of Book IV of Paterson—in which Williams praises the curative powers of both radium and Social Credit—has been largely ignored by the critical tradition around the long poem. Hugh Kenner, who reviewed the edition of Books I-IV of Paterson in the August 1952 issue of Poetry, completely effaces the Social Credit material, describing the middle section of Book IV as “devoted to the heroism of the Curies” (282). What attention it has received is almost always negative. Joseph Riddell explains that Paterson IV has been subject to “the most consistent critical disapprobation” of all the sections of the poem (237). Joel Conarroe calls the sequence the “least successful poetic unit in the book,” and compares it to “Pound at his most dispensable” (127, 117). Along the same lines, Louis Martz writes that the “highly Poundian diatribe” is “composed in something like Pound’s broken multi-cultural style… all this ending with an overt echo of Pound’s unmistakable epistolary style” (83).¹ Since these initial readings of Paterson, very few critics have taken up Williams’s use of Social Credit in the poem.
This is surprising, because one of the more important contemporary debates surrounding Williams’s work is how the poet understood the relationship between the aesthetic object and the world.² The composition of Paterson, with its collage of documentary materials from histories of the region, newspapers, and letters, raises the question of poem’s relationship to the world in one way, revealing that the language of the poem need not be rarified; the materials that make the poem may be, to appropriate Williams’s most-hated review, “anti-poetic.”³ But the radium-credit section of Book IV raises the question differently and perhaps more forcefully, as it seems to endorse a concrete plan for the reformation of the American banking system. That is, Paterson IV not only borrows from the anti-poetic world, it also seems to want to shape it.

As such, the radium-credit section might be understood as evidence of a sea change in Williams’s aesthetic practice from his early to late career.⁴ Certainly, it contradicts a central argument made in 1925’s In the American Grain, where Williams writes that the problems in U.S. society call for a solution “neither material nor political, but… purely moral and aesthetic” (136). The wager of this chapter is that the presence of the radium-credit section is not in contradiction with, but in fact is a continuation and revision of the “moral and aesthetic” solution sought in American Grain. In both texts, the Puritanical legacy is the cause of not only “material and political” crises, but also “moral and aesthetic” impasses. What does change between the two texts is Williams’s understanding of how that legacy might be erased. In American Grain, he proposes a rather simple synthetic solution: a combination of the Old and New Worlds would heal the rift between the Puritan colonizers and the Native American people they subjugated. Paterson, which seems at first to be about a struggle between two giants—Dr. Paterson (source and representative of the city of Paterson) and Alexander Hamilton—and therefore as a reproduction of the American Grain binary, instead proposes that the revelation of totality will
eradicate the Puritanical stain from U.S. society. But, as we shall see when we turn back to the radium-credit section of *Paterson IV*, Williams understands the production of totality to be an aesthetic solution to an aesthetic problem. That is, while Pound believed that fixing the economy in the poem would fix the economy in the world, Williams believes that fixing the economy in the poem can only fix the poem.

1. A Culture Stuccoed

*In the American Grain* offers Williams’s first attempt at identifying the problem he saw inherent to U.S. culture. The text retells North American history from the initial Viking settlements in Vinland (Newfoundland) to the American Civil War, describing colonization as a battle between the spirits of the Old and New Worlds. The Old World is represented by, in the words of Walter Sutton, “the rapacious Spanish conquistadors and the more restrained Puritan ‘acquisators’”; the New World is, in contrast, represented by “the spontaneous and erotic Indian primitives” (4). Both the “Puritan ‘acquisators,’” and the “rapacious Spanish” refuse to “touch” the New World; they “clung,” Williams writes, “to the old, striving all the while to pull off pieces to themselves from the fat of the new bounty” (136). That is, rather than making a New World, the Old World Spanish and Puritan settlers wanted to recreate their homes with the help of the plentiful wealth of North America.

To the Spanish explorers, the New World appears as a seductive female. This is no deeply hidden subtext: Williams himself writes, “[o]ne is forced upon the conception of the New World as a woman.” (222). “De Soto on the New World” explicitly figures the relationship between the explorer and the New World as erotic. “She,” the New World, speaks directly to De Soto:

SHE—Courage is strength—and you are vigilant, sagacious, firm besides. But I am beautiful…I am beautiful…Believe it. You will not dare to cease following
me… turning from the sea, facing inland. And in the end you shall receive of me, nothing—save one long caress as of a great river passing forever upon your sweet corse. (45)

“She” believes that De Soto is being drawn further and further toward her—toward her center, and all the eroticism that implies—by her beauty. But one of De Soto’s companions—whose voice makes up the rest of the chapter—contradicts this. He explains that what De Soto is after is not the New World’s beauty, but her riches: he is driven by his desire “to find another treasure like that of Atabalipa” and follows rumors of great wealth—“a country toward the rising sun, governed by a woman, where there was gold in quantity”; “a province called Chiaha, subject to a chief of Coca” (46, 47). De Soto’s winding path through Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas never led to treasure. Instead, his companion’s narrative of the journey is punctuated by physical deprivation: the explorers do not know how to hunt or gather food in the unfamiliar landscapes, their heavy armor is unsuited for the humid weather, and they are regularly ambushed by Native American tribes. Their journey eventually leads them to the Mississippi River—the “great river” “She” has promised De Soto. There, they experience, for the first time, relative and sustained ease: “[n]umbers who had been a long time badly covered here clothed themselves,” they remake weaponry and armor, and learn how to catch game (54). But it as that this point that De Soto gives up. Juan Ortiz, his translator, dies; unable to effectively communicate with the Native Americans, De Soto realizes he will never find the treasures he sought and turns away from the New World: no longer “facing inland,” he sends men to scout for a route to the sea. At stake here is the difference between the wealth sought by De Soto and the wealth offered by the New World. He wants gold, copper, pearls—riches and raw materials to take back to Spain; she provides clothing, food, and weapons appropriate to their surroundings. But this is not enough for De Soto, so he betrays her. He dies, and the
promise of the New World is fulfilled. His body is weighted down and submerged in the Mississippi; at the end, he “receive[s]... nothing—save one long caress as of a great river” (45).

Like De Soto, the Puritan fail to alter their ways of life to the new environment. Williams writes:

the problem of the New World was, as every new comer soon found out, an awkward one, on all sides the same: how to replace from the wild land that which, at home, they had scarcely known the Old World meant to them; through difficulty and even brutal hardship to find a ground to take the place of England. They could not do it. They clung, one way or another, to the old, striving the while to pull off pieces to themselves from the fat of the new bounty. (136)

That is, in an attempt to make the New World “take the place of England,” the settlers “clung... to the old,” supplanted with “pieces” of the new. Those parts they did not want, they shut out.

The relationship between the New World and Benjamin Franklin, who is described as the “great dike-keeper,” mirrors the relationship De Soto had: Franklin “sensed the power and knew only enough to want to run an engine with it” (155). Of “our pioneer statesmen,” he writes that “they cannot quite leave hands off [the New World] but must TOUCH it, in a ‘practical’ way” (157).

Although the desire of De Soto and Franklin are different—captured perfectly by Walter Sutton’s “conquistador” and “acquisator”—they have the same fundamental relationship to the New World. Both want to take from it, to either return pieces of it to the Old World or use it to build the Old World on new ground. As such, they only “touch” the New World in a way that would benefit them: there is no attempt to change themselves to suit the new environment. Rather, they make the New World submit to the environment they have imported.

In contrast to these figures, Daniel Boone represents the promise of a truly American pioneer, a figure who “would master this [new wilderness], to prove it potent” (137). Boone’s mastery over the New World’s wilderness is different from the domination sought by De Soto and Franklin. He understands that
[t]here must be a new wedding. But he saw and only he saw the prototype of it all, the native savage. To Boone the Indian was his greatest master. Not for himself surely to be an Indian, though they eagerly sought to adopt him into their tribes, but the reverse: to be himself in a new world, Indianlike. If the land were to be possessed, it must be as the Indian possessed it. Boone saw the truth of the Red Man, not an aberrant type, treacherous and anti-white to be feared and exterminated, but as a natural expression of the place… (139)

That is, to have mastery of the New World, one must become “a natural expression” of it. The possession of the Indian that Boone sees is a reciprocal possession: the Indian possesses and is possessed by the New World. De Soto rejected the way he and his men came to be shaped by the New World by the time they reached the Mississippi, still hoping for the treasure that would make him famous in the Old World. Boone, in contrast, wishes for precisely what De Soto refused. What Boone seeks is not domination, but synthesis.

The difference between the early Spanish and Puritan settlers and Daniel Boone, then, comes down to their different approaches to living in the New World. The same difference is produced as the conflict between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr. While Hamilton seeks to control the New World for his profit, Burr seeks synthesis. The chapter concerning Hamilton and Burr is a dialog: one speaker attempts to convince the other that Burr is the true hero of the Revolutionary War. He claims that the U.S.’s separation from England was a necessary step of a much larger project; England was “[a] dry skin to be cast off, an itch, that’s all. There was a deeper matter… an untracked force that might lead anywhere; it was springtime in a new world when all things were possible” (193). From his perspective, then, the Revolutionary War was a step toward reconciliation with the New World. Instead of that, however, we find in the early history of the U.S. a continuation of the conquistadors’ and acquisitors’ project: to take from the New World what is useful and shut out the rest.

Burr is distinguished from the other founders in this chapter not by virtue of a particular set of policies or initiatives, but rather by his famous love of women. This is foreshadowed in the
chapter just preceding it, when Burr meets Jacataqua, the young sachem of the Abenaki people. She is, herself, a synthesis of the Old and New Worlds as she “showed the best traits of her mixed French and Indian blood” (186). Also, as leader of the tribe and hunter, she combines elements of femininity and masculinity. She is immediately taken by Burr, and he finds himself “for the first and last time at a loss before a woman” (187). His interest in Jacataqua reveals that Burr not only sees, but desires, the New World. In the context of the post-Revolutionary U.S., Burr’s love of women is figured as a radical feminism:

> He was perhaps the only one of the time who saw women, in the flesh, as serious, and they hailed and welcomed with deep gratitude and profound joy his serious knowledge and regard and liberating force—for them. Freedom? Then for women also… (204–205)

Burr, unlike the other founders, rightly saw freedom from England as only the first step in a larger project: the promise of freedom should be extended to all. Only then would they truly live in the New World. Williams, of course, could have represented Burr’s commitment to freedom in a number of plausible by ways. But, by rendering it as his relationship to women, he makes Burr’s politics continuous with the figural structure he has used so far in the text. Burr’s commitment to feminine liberation corresponds, then, to a commitment to the liberation of the seductive feminine force of the New World that the other founders would prefer to suppress.

Only through the suppression of the New World could Alexander Hamilton’s vision of the new nation come to pass. Like the Spanish and Puritan explorers and settlers who came before, Hamilton wants to “pull off pieces to themselves from the fat of the new bounty” (136). He planned to harness the whole, young, aspiring genius to a treadmill[.] Paterson he wished to make capital of the country because there was waterpower there which to his time and mind seemed colossal. And so he organized a company to hold the land thereabouts, with dams and sluices, the origin today of the vilest swillhole in christendom, the Passaic River; impossible to remove the nuisance so tight that he, Hamilton, sewed up his privileges unto kingdomcome, through his holding
The plan described here is the Society for the Establishment of Useful Manufactures, a private, but state-sponsored, corporation Hamilton founded in 1791. Ostensibly created to increase the manufacturing capacity of the U.S. so that it could wean itself off expensive foreign imports, the S.U.M., as it was often abbreviated, was actually a way for Hamilton to further consolidate his power. The corporation would, most basically, yield profits for Hamilton’s main constituents: bankers and merchants in New York. At the same time, it functioned as, as it is explained in *Paterson II*, “a corollary to the famous struggle for assumption” (*Paterson* 69).6 The Society aligns with Hamilton’s plan to centralize the Revolutionary War debts in the federal government because he understood that “unless industry were set upon its feet, unless manufactured goods could be produced income for taxation would be a myth” (69). The taxation powers Hamilton sought were not, at least as Williams presents them in *Paterson II*, simply an efficient way to repay the war debts. They also support the Federal Reserve System which (as we’ve heard before) “create[s] money from nothing and lend[s] it to private business… and also to the Government whenever it needs money in war and peace; for which we, the people, representing the Government… must pay interest to the banks in the forms of high taxes” (73).7 The anti-Fed argument presents the banking practices of the mid-twentieth century as directly descended from Hamilton.

Williams’s low opinion of Hamilton was by no means unique in the 1920s. The early twentieth-century was a nadir for Hamilton’s reputation, especially during the Great Depression and New Deal. As Stephen Knott explains, Claude G. Bowers, an historian and journalist, set the tone for the era with his book *Jefferson and Hamilton: The Struggle for Democracy*. An advisor to Franklin D. Roosevelt, Bowers’s text described “the corruption that was starting to seep into
the social life of the Federalist-dominated capital,” presenting the history of Jefferson and Hamilton’s disagreements as a “simplistic tale of good versus evil” (Knott 115). One reader of Bowers’s text—Ezra Pound—declares Hamilton “the Prime snot in ALL American history” (LXII/350, Knott 128). Despite the fact that this “tale of good and evil,” in which Jefferson, a force for democracy, bravely opposed Hamilton, Knott notes that “much of Hamilton’s vision has come to pass” (7). As he explains:

[T]he foundation of America’s superpower status was laid in the early days of the Republic when Alexander Hamilton, who had a vision of American greatness, battled with forces fearful of the concentrated political, economic, and military power necessary to achieve that greatness. All his endeavors were directed toward establishing the United States as a formidable nation, efforts that have ultimately come to fruition. (6–7)

We live in Hamilton’s nation—“Hamiltonia”—whether we like it or not.

And it is in “Hamiltonia” that Paterson takes place. Although Hamilton does not receive sustained attention until the middle section of Paterson II, Williams includes him in the poem from the very beginning. There is an early reference to Hamilton looking at the falls paired with a summary of how quickly Paterson grew in the nineteenth century: “[f]rom the ten houses Hamilton saw” in the 1790s, the city grew and grew, until in 1870, it had a population of almost 35,000, drawn by the jobs at the mills powered by the Passaic River (10). But Hamilton also appears by allusion in the preface of the poem:

To make a start,
out of particulars
and make them general, rolling
up the sum, by defective means— (3)

“Sum” in this section has a number of possible meanings. The local meaning, of course, is “sum” in the sense of mathematical accounting. It is hard, however, not to read it as a reference to and critique of the “defective means” of the Society for the Establishment of Useful Manufactures.
In Paterson II, Williams refers to Hamilton by allusion, repeating the phrase “great beast.” The phrase is famously attributed to Hamilton, who was supposed to have said to an anti-Federalist (or pro-democratic, depending upon your perspective) interlocutor, “Your people, sir—your people are a great beast.” (Knott argues that the phrase is surely apocryphal.) In Paterson II, it appears three times: first, it interrupts a long quotation from a 1936 news article recounting a stand-off between “the German Singing Society” and William Dalzell, “who owned a piece of property near the scene of the festivities [and] shot John Joseph Van Houten” because he was determined to keep the singers from trampling his lands. A mob formed after the murder, and Williams describes them as “a great beast!” to link the story (and Dalzell) with Hamilton (46). Later, the “great beast” refers to Dr. Paterson himself: “The ‘great beast’ come to sun himself / as he may” (54). Finally it describes the park-goers leaving the park: “The ‘great beast’ all removed / before the plunging night” (80). In two instances, it is used in the way Hamilton is supposed to have meant it: to describe a mob of citizens. But the second instance, when it is applied to Dr. Paterson, links him with the citizens and serves to further separate Hamilton from both “great beasts”: the giant Mr. Paterson and his mob of thoughts and dreams.

The confrontation between Dr. Paterson and Hamilton is the climax of Paterson II. After spending a day in the park, Dr. Paterson finds himself disgusted by the citizens (which amounts to a kind of self-disgust), describing “the ugly legs of the young girls, / pistons too powerful for delicacy!” (44). These lines indicate how Hamilton’s plan has deformed the bodies of the citizens, so that the “legs of… young girls” become “pistons.” (We shall come back to the idea of “deformation” at the end of the chapter.) Dr. Paterson then listens to a sermon by Klaus Ehrens that admonishes the audience to give away all their money. The sermon is repeatedly interrupted by segments of the history of the Federal Reserve System and Hamilton that I quoted
above. The sermon—which proposes poverty as an antidote to materialism—is no answer to the corruption depicted in the anti-Fed propaganda. It seems that Hamilton has won, and Paterson belongs to him.

*In the American Grain* and *Paterson*, then, together produce a consistent diagnosis of U.S. culture and politics: we still live with the legacy of the Puritans which appears in the twentieth century as corrupt banking policies and the exploitation of labor. *American Grain* argues that if certain figures, like Daniel Boone and Aaron Burr, had been correctly understood in their time, the contemporary situation might have been prevented. For Boone and Burr, the “right” relationship is figured as the right kind of relationship between men and women: Boone desires a “new wedding,” Burr is the only one of the founders who takes women seriously. As such, one way of understanding *In the American Grain* is as a dialectic: the thesis (New World) and antithesis (Old World) can only be resolved in synthesis. *Paterson*, with its hero opposed to the villainous Hamilton, initially seems to want to produce synthesis in very similar terms.

2. An Interpenetration

The metaphysical structure of *Paterson* certainly allows for the kind of synthesis figures like Boone and Burr produced in *American Grain*. In the first pages, we are introduced to Paterson, who “lies in the valley under the Passaic Falls,” and his female counterpart, “the low mountain” (6, 8). The structure relies on the traditional gendered divide between civilization and nature—“a man like a city and a woman like a flower”—and, between mind and body—in the opening of *Paterson II*, Williams explains, “The scene’s the Park / upon the rock, / female to the city / —upon whose body Paterson instructs his thoughts” (7, 43). Combined with the proliferation of images of unhappy marriage and divorce in the first books and Williams’s call for the reconciliation of idea and thing (a subject we shall return to shortly), the arrangement of
the characters seems to call for reconciliation in the form of marriage. But this is forcefully rejected in the closing pages of *Paterson II*.

Following his disappointing day in the park, Dr. Paterson has climbed up Garrett Mountain and looks down at the Passaic River.

*Only the thought of the stream comforts him, its terrifying plunge, inviting marriage... From his eyes sparrows start and sing. His ears are toadstools, his fingers have begun to sprout leaves (his voice is drowned under the falls)*

*Poet, poet! sing your song, quickly! or not insects but pulpy weeds will blot out your kind. He all but falls* (81–83)

The jump into the Passaic is proposed as a kind of marriage: Dr. Paterson will be united with the river. As such, it would produce the “new wedding” called for in *American Grain*, as Dr. Paterson would merge with the feminine, natural element. As he contemplates the leap, this synthesis begins: “[h]is ears are toadstools, his fingers have / begun to sprout leaves.” The synthesis presented revises the poem’s metaphysical structure. The “female element” associated with Dr. Paterson is not the river, but the land around Paterson. Further, rather than welcoming the reconciliation between the male and female elements, Paterson is exhorted to “sing [his] song, quickly!” Without the song, “pulpy weeds will blot [him] out.” So, what would result from his leap isn’t synthesis, but the destruction of Dr. Paterson and, perhaps, Paterson itself, at the expense of nature. The leap, while formally joining Paterson with the river, would not allow him to “be *himsel*f in a new world” (*Grain* 137). Rather, he would become part of nature; the slow transformation of his body into “toadstools” and “leaves” would be complete, and all that would be left would be “pulpy weeds.” It is here that Williams most clearly signals that while the
diagnosis of American culture in *Paterson* is the same as what he offered in *In the American Grain*, the solution he is proposing is more sophisticated.

Up until this point, I’ve focused on the relationship between Dr. Paterson and the “female to the city.” This ignores the other central relationship set up in the first pages of the poem and alluded to above: the connection between Dr. Paterson and the citizens of Paterson, which I believe to be more central to the poem than the marriage plot. As we saw above, Williams describes the project of the poem: “to make a start / out of particulars / and make them general” (3). It is not quite right to understand this mission statement as capturing the relationship between the male and female elements of the poem: who would count as “particular” and who “general”? While Williams does indicate that Dr. Paterson is in love with “many women,” it doesn’t make sense to think that we might move from the plural women to get a sense of the man, as the demand to “make [the particulars] general” in the preface seems to indicate that we should. Rather, the mission statement refers to the relationship between Dr. Paterson and the citizens of Paterson, described here:

> Paterson lies in the valley under the Passaic Falls
> its spent waters forming the outline of his back…
> …Eternally asleep,
> his dreams walk about the city where he persists
> incognito. Butterflies settle on his stone ear.
> Immortal he neither moves nor rouses and is seldom
> seen, though he breaths and the subtleties of his machinations
> drawing their substance from the noise of the pouring river
> animate a thousand automatons. Who because they
> neither know their sources nor the sills of their
> disappointments walk outside their bodies aimlessly for the most part,
> locked and forgot in their desires—unroused. (6)

The citizens of Paterson are Dr. Paterson’s dreams (later, they are described as his thoughts). As such, it immediately makes more sense to read the relationship between the sleeping giant and his dreams as the relationship between “general” and “particular” referenced in the Preface.
Further, this connection is immediately linked to Hamilton, because Dr. Paterson draws his strength from “the pouring river” that “animate[s] a thousand automatons.” “Automatons” could refer either to the citizens or the mills that Hamilton planned. Finally, “they [do not] know their sources” reminds us of the suppression of the New World described in *American Grain*.

We saw already that Williams doesn’t quite think the method he starts with—“rolling / up the sum”—will work. In these opening pages, he proposes another method. Following his introduction of Dr. Paterson and the citizens, he writes: “—Say it, no ideas but in things—” (6). The use of em-dashes sets the line apart from the rest of the section, which is primarily engaged in stage-setting. It also reveals that, at least to some extent, Williams already understands the solution to the problem presented by the general and particular.

“No ideas but in things” is perhaps one of Williams’s most famous aphorisms. It captures the reciprocal relationship between the subjective (idea) and objective (thing) worlds, describing, in Denise Levertov’s words, “the equipoise of thing and idea” (141). I would put it a bit differently, and say “no ideas but in things” endorses the production of totality. Set so close to the description of the rift between Dr. Paterson and the citizens, Williams seems to indicate that we must be careful about how strongly we draw the distinction between the two. Or, as he puts in the preface, we must attend to the “interpenetration”:

```
... the city
the man, an identity—it can’t be
otherwise—an
interpenetration, both ways. Rolling
up! obverse, reverse;
the drunk the sober; the illustrious
the gross; one. (4)
```

Like “no ideas but in things” and “general and particular,” Williams presents a series of seemingly opposed ideas—“obverse, reverse,” “the drunk the sober,” “the illustrious / the gross”—that in fact depend on each other. We don’t need the idea of sobriety until we have an
Idea of drunkenness, just as the illustrious depends on the gross to reveal their success. It is not that they are identical, but that these ideas “interpenetrate”: although superficially opposed to each other, they require the other to have meaning. Or, to put it in (now familiar) Hegelian terms, the two elements produce an identity of identity and difference, a totality.

With the synthesis of opposing forces rejected in Paterson II, it is evident that Williams is after something like totality. One way we see this is in his inclusion of traditionally marginalized figures in his poetry. I am by no means the first critic to point to this element in Williams’s poetry, nor will I be on new ground when I discuss the problematic ways Williams represents race and gender below. For example, Ann Mikkelsen argues that the appearance of Corydon, the rich lesbian who tries to seduce her Paterson-born masseuse in Paterson IV, “exemplifies Williams’s redefinition of the valued self and his desire to confront readers with the culturally relative nature of social and aesthetic value” (68). That is, his presentation of Corydon—a not immediately sympathetic figure—is part of his desire to use the aesthetic to reveal the arbitrary ways people are valued.

The most obvious and, as we shall see, most troubling version of this in Paterson is the “Beautiful Thing” in Paterson III. Initially, the Beautiful Thing refers to the successive natural disasters that all but leveled Paterson in 1902: a fire in February, a flood in March, and finally followed by a tornado. Williams presents these events in the opening pages of Paterson III, “Blow! So be it. Bring down! So be it. Consume / and submerge! So be it. Cyclone, fire / and flood,” later linking them explicitly with the figure of the Beautiful Thing: “Beautiful thing : // —a dark flame, / a wind, a flood” (97, 100).

At the close of the middle section, however, the Beautiful Thing is given human form. Dr. Paterson performs a house call and treats the badly beaten woman. The story of her injuries
is never given in full, but it implies she was the victim of assault, kidnapping, and rape: “the guys from Paterson / beat up / the guys from Newark and told / them to stay the hell out / … then / socked [her] one / across the nose”; then “they maled / and femaled [her] jealously” for three days (127–28). She shows the doctor her legs, “scarred (as a child) / by the whip” (126). Dr. Paterson is moved by the Beautiful Thing, comparing her to the mythical Persephone and promising “[i]t’s all for you” (126–27). On one hand, Dr. Paterson’s attention to her (both as a physician and a poet) is evidence of the inclusive organizing principle of Paterson, as Ann Mikkelsen described it above. At the same time, it is evidence of a particular kind of paternal racism and misogyny that also characterizes his work.

This is captured, of course, in the name: the “Beautiful Thing.” Williams selected the name to link her to the manifestations of a particular force in American culture. The phrase originates in the passages from Christopher Columbus’s journals that describe his landing on Hispaniola:

> On the shore [of Hispaniola] I sent the people for water, some with arms, and others with casks; and as it was some little distance, I waited two hours for them. During that time I walked among the trees which was the beautiful thing which I had ever seen…. (qtd. Grain 26, Paterson 177)

Calling the beaten woman in Paterson III Beautiful Thing links her to Williams’s earlier project and associates her with the repressed spirit of the New World. At the same time, rendering her as a “thing” allows Williams to connect her more easily with the destructive force that levels Paterson: all of these—including her form as poor, injured, black woman in the 1940s—are manifestations of the same “beautiful thing” Columbus encountered upon his discovery of the New World.

But by calling her the “Beautiful Thing,” Williams also objectifies her.11 Readers of Williams attuned to his handling of race and gender will not be surprised by this observation.
Non-white figures are presented as objects of fascination throughout his work. For example, in “Sub Terra,” the first poem of 1917’s *Al Que Quiere!,* Williams seeks out a “band” of likeminded people who would be willing “to come with [him] / poking into negro houses / with their gloom and their smell” (*Collected* 63). The anthropological interest Williams has in black people persists in *Paterson.* In the section that directly precedes Dr. Paterson’s meeting with the Beautiful Thing, Williams includes part of a letter he found in his maid’s room. It closes with this: “Tell Raymond I said I babetut hatche isus cashutute / Just a new way of talking kid. It is called (Tut) maybe you heard of it” (125). Williams’s lifelong interest in and celebration of regional dialect (his poetry derives from “the mouths of Polish mothers”) certainly made this snippet appealing. But, as it appears just before the story of Dr. Paterson’s meeting with the “Beautiful Thing,” it functions as a further fetishization of non-white bodies and culture.12

The women in the text—white and non-white—appear at first glance to fare little better. The very metaphysics of *Paterson,* in which the female element is Garrett Mountain, “—upon whose body Paterson instructs his thoughts,” renders the feminine inert, associating it with dumb nature that waits for the male presence to enliven it (43). Like the “female to the city,” the feminine principle of the New World is associated with nature, while the masculine principle represents civilization. One formal feature of the text that demands an account on these terms is the presence of Cress’s letters in *Paterson I* and *II.* Some critics read the letters as evidence of the potential for a female poet who might rise to the same level as Dr. Paterson. For example, Conarroe writes that she is “most fully delineated” female character in the poem and comes to represent the “thwarted feminine principle” (102). Theodora Graham argues that “Williams had valued [Cress’s] potential value more than he permits the reader of *Paterson* to suspect” (179). At the same time, Sandra Gilbert points to Williams’s editorial control over the letters, which
allowed him to delete important details from Cress’s life so that her statements appear out of the material context from which she was writing. As such, he turns the real author of the letters—poet Marcia Nardi—“into a character, and thus a creation he could control” (8). The ambivalence with which Williams presents and with which critics of Williams respond to the female figures in *Paterson* and *American Grain* will be central to the argument moving forward.

Linda Kinnahan takes a position contrary to most readings of Williams’s portrayal of women. She argues that the absence of women shouldn’t be read as the poet’s lack of interest in their impact on American history, but rather as his interest in “the process through which male-authored cultural texts define and regulate the feminine” (106–7). Her study, *Poetics of the Feminine*, “calls attention to the interaction between essentialism and constructivism” in the work of Williams, Mina Loy, Denise Levertov, and Kathleen Fraser; she argues that, in *American Grain*, the female presence functions as a disruptive element that challenges and, in some cases, undoes the patriarchal authority of the Puritans (117). Kinnahan particularly draws our attention to one disturbing image:

Do you know that the old town-records in Massachusetts show few men without two and many with as many as seven wives? Not at all uncommon to have had five. How? The first ones died shooting children against the wilderness like cannon balls. (*Grain* 179)

Kinnahan explains:

With his doctor’s eye, Williams reads woman’s experience in to the New England records of marriages and deaths… and from this perspective he condemns the Puritan rationale for reproduction. Reduced to “shooting children against the wilderness like cannonballs” […] the Puritan women find their sexuality defined by male need; their material capacity to create is valued by men primarily as a tool in conquering the wilderness. Their bodies become sites of weapons production[.] (112)

Here, Kinnahan demonstrates that Williams recognizes a fundamental aspect of gender inequality: the reproductive labor of women goes radically undervalued.
In this, we might credit Williams with prefiguring a major trend in feminist criticism that reveals capitalism’s complicity in the creation and maintenance of the binary system of gender. Critiques of capitalism’s under-value of “women’s work” have been central to feminist Marxism for a long time. New work, most notably by Roswitha Scholz and the authors of *Endnotes*, demonstrates how capitalism has created and enforced the gender binary. For these authors, gender “is the anchoring of a certain group of individuals in a specific sphere of social activities” (*Endnotes*). That is, capitalism, which cannot valorize reproductive labor in the same way it valorizes productive labor, has had to produce a subordinated system within social life to maintain itself: capitalism depends on reproductive labor, but cannot value it without endangering the production of profit.

The Beautiful Thing perfectly demonstrates this point. When Dr. Paterson meets her, Williams draws our attention to her economic situation as much as he does to her race. Dr. Paterson is shown to her basement room by “the Lady of the House.” Many critics understand the lady as the Beautiful Thing’s landlady, although Walter Scott Peterson suggests that she may be a madam, and the Beautiful Thing a sex worker (157). I think it is more plausible to posit that the Beautiful Thing is a maid or servant in one of the wealthier homes in Paterson. First, the capitalization of “Lady” suggests that Williams is using it as an aristocratic title. Second, the room the Beautiful Thing lives in is “by the laundry tubs,” which connects her to domestic labor (125). No matter what the real position of the “Lady of the House,” it is evident that the Beautiful Thing is poor and her living quarters are terrible. She has a “damp bed” covered only by a “dirty sheet.” The basement contains only two small “mud plashed” windows and is permeated by a “furnace smell” (125–26). The Beautiful Thing embodies the intersection of race, gender, and class that excludes her from both capitalism and social life. Further, the whip scars
on her legs function as evidence of the history of racialized violence in the United States, which persists into the present.

Williams’s attention to the details of the New England wives’ gendered labor and to the Beautiful Thing’s position in society suggests that the elements Williams is trying to reconcile in *Paterson* are more complex than those that appeared in *American Grain*. In *Paterson*, the imagined solution to the problem of American culture is not—as it initially seemed to be—to derive a general principle from the particular. Rather, what becomes clear at the end of *Paterson III* is that Williams wants to reframe the problem entirely. One of the major events in *Paterson III* is the destruction of the library, where Dr. Paterson has retreated following his confrontation with Hamilton in *Paterson II*. The library, which represents “all staleness” and the “field of unrelated culture stuccoed upon” the New World, is destroyed by the Beautiful Thing (*Paterson* 100; *Grain* 212). While the solution to the suppression and exclusion of the New World in *American Grain* was to include it—so that Boone could “be himself in a new world” (137)—the solution to suppression and exclusion of the New World is the destruction of hierarchy. Rather than arguing that figures like the Beautiful Thing be included in the library, Williams simply gets rid of the library. The goal is not, then, to repair the defective means by which particulars might be made general, but rather to change the terms of the argument, so that the structure that creates hierarchy is destroyed. And, as I shall demonstrate now, this work is done on the level of form.

4. Limping Iambics

*In the American Grain*’s critique of Puritanism is made primarily on the level of content—based on who and what they allowed into their community and who and what they shut out. But, at the same time, Williams critiques the formal methods passed down from the Puritans to the twentieth-century. The most obvious of these is the critique of historiography. It is implicit
in the very form of the text: Williams has returned to the sources—using primary materials as the basis for most of the chapters—to figure out what happened rather than accepting what has been passed down in the work of historians. This critique is made explicitly in the chapter on Burr, called “The Virtue of History.” There, the pro-Burr speaker claims that we fail to recognize the centrality of Burr to the Revolutionary War because the history books have recorded him as a villain. A true analysis of the facts—the one Williams is providing his readers with—would reveal that Burr was the hero and Hamilton the villain. With bad historiography, he argues, “the dead can be stifled like the living” (189). When his interlocutor objects that such a claim is “metaphysical,” the first speaker retorts, “[t]hat of the dead which exists in our imaginations has as much fact as we have in ourselves. The premise that serves to fix us fixes also that part of them which we remember” (189). This critique of historiography—that the present can be “fixe[d]” by the past—is, in fact, the central claim of *American Grain*: contemporary American society, culture, and politics was set in place by the social, cultural, and political practices of the Puritans, who refused to have contact with the spirit of the New World.

Further, while the Puritans claimed that their separation from the Native American people they displaced was a “moral” separation, Williams provides evidence that their religious rhetoric is duplicitous. They presented their relationship to the New World in terms of “moral” purity, when in fact it was cover for their material and political schemes. For example, when explaining the Puritan attack on Thomas Morton’s settlement at Merry Mount (or Ma-re Mount, as Williams writes it). There was a “practical side” to the question: Morton, not a member of the Puritan church, traded guns and alcohol with the tribes in the area, which “was unfair… when the other settlers were not permitted to do so” (76). Morton had a commercial advantage over the Puritan settlement, as his religion didn’t impose limitations on what he could use to trade with the tribes.
Williams goes on, however, that “[a]nother side of Puritan disgust with this brazen fellow was the moral one of his consorting with the Indian girls. It was upon this count, not the first, that they chose finally to attack him” (76). That is, while the Puritans had a “practical,” or, to use the language from the Boone chapter, “material [and] political,” reason to attack Morton, they chose to use the “moral” reason.

Williams expands on this further in the Père Sebastian Rasles chapter. There, he makes one of his more explicit claims regarding the Puritanical mistake in the settlement. He writes,

For the great task God had destined them to perform, they were clipped in mind, stripped to the physical necessities. They could not afford to allow their sense to wander any more than they could allow a member of their company to wander from the precinct of the church, even from Boston to Casco Bay, for worldly profit. This their formula condemned. For that Hannah Swanton was punished by captivity and temptation among the Catholics in Quebec.—I mean, that this form, this form itself, such a religion upon our lips, though it have an economic, biologic basis in truth, nevertheless it is bred of brutality, inhumanity, cruel amputations and that THIS is the sum of its moral effect. (111)

Essentially, Williams argues, the “material” conditions were such that the Puritans were required to prevent certain kinds of commerce and behavior—trading guns and liquor, travel to Casco Bay in Maine, consorting with the Native American people in the area. Rather than describe the situation as it was, however, the Puritans created a scaffolding of morality—what we might call ideology—to hide their desire for wealth. So, Boone’s great insight is not only that the solution to the difficulty is “moral and aesthetic,” but also that the categories of morality and aesthetics are used to cover over the material and political realities of the world.

This attention to the historical persistence of form gives us a different perspective on his choice of Poe as the only truly American—in the sense of the synthesis between Old and New Worlds—who has appeared. Williams praises Poe’s “firm statements on the character of form” and summarizes the lessons he learned from the poet as “borrow nothing from the scene, but… put all the weight of effort into the writing… Method, punctuation, grammar” (219, 227). That is,
Williams’s interest in Poe depends on Poe’s work on the level of form, not content. Poe’s “character of form,” which is derived from his locality, should replace the forms passed down to us from the Puritan settlers.

Throughout *In the American Grain* and *Paterson*, Williams makes reference to deformation. For example, he closes Book I with a passage from Symonds’s *Studies of the Greek Poets*, where “lame or limping imabics,” which were used to “bring the meter still more within the sphere of prose and common speech” and created a “harmony between the crabbed verses and the distorted subject with which they dealt” (40). This passage prefigures Williams’s development of the new measure, which, by making use of local dialect and attempting to “be commensurate” with the contemporary world, would regenerate American prosody. Beyond form in the sense of poetics, Williams compares himself to a three-legged dog in the Preface to *Book I*, references Peter the Dwarf in *Books I and II of Paterson*, and he refers to the physical deformation of factory workers in *Book II*. In *In the American Grain*, he writes that “morals affect the food and food the bone… [so] that, aesthetically, morally, we are deformed” (109).

But Williams’s interest in the hidden politics of form, especially poetic form, extends beyond *In the American Grain* or *Paterson*. In fact, he provides a version of this argument in the poem “Pastoral (When I Was Younger)” from *Al Que Quiere!*, which is then expanded on in 1944’s “Raleigh was Right.” In these poems, the subject of critique is not Puritan rhetoric, but the tradition of pastoral poetry.

“Pastoral (When I Was Younger)” begins with a false conflict:

When I was younger  
it was plain to me  
I must make something of myself  
Older now… *(Collected 64)*
The “when” and “now” structure implies that there will be a difference between the younger speaker, who desired success, and the older speaker, who will presumably explain what changed. But, as it turns out, the “when”/“now” conflict is misdirection: the present-day speaker “walk[s] back streets / admire the houses / of the very poor,” indicating that he has, indeed, made something of himself (5–6). In fact, the poem depends upon it. As Caleb Smith writes in his explication of the poem, the verb “admiring” is part of the speaker’s answer to his younger self’s desire for success, as it “establishes a distance between Williams and the ‘very poor’” and allows him “to consume their dwellings as a delightful scene,” separate from the socio-economic conditions that produce “furniture gone wrong,” “outhouses / built of barrel staves,” a “roof out of line” and “yards cluttered” (Smith 157). In fact, the speaker isn’t interested in these visual representations of poverty at all. Instead, what he’s after is a color. The first stanza closes:

…all,
if I am fortunate,
smeared a bluish green
that properly weathered
pleases me best of all colors. (Collected 64)

What he’s looking for, it turns out, aren’t the “houses / of the very poor,” but the “bluish green” he finds on them if he is “fortunate.” The emphasis on color confirms what the verb “admire” implies: the speaker seeks a kind of aesthetic engagement that disregards how that aesthetic engagement might come to be. It doesn’t matter what caused the color—one can imagine he’d be just as pleased to find it in his own backyard—it just matters that he sees it.

A much later poem—1944’s “Raleigh Was Right” —makes Williams’s argument about the economic basis of the pastoral tradition explicit. The title references two pastoral poems: Walter Raleigh’s “The Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd,” which serves as a retort to Christopher Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love.” Marlowe’s shepherd promises his love a life of leisure and bounty that resembles a wealthy life in the city: “beds of roses / and a thousand
fragrant posies,” but also “[a] gown made of the finest wool” and “buckles of the purest gold.”

Raleigh’s response doesn’t call the bounty of the country into question; instead, he questions whether such a love can last:

> The flowers do fade, and wanton fields,  
> To wayward winter reckoning yields,  
> A honey tongue, a heart of gall,  
> Is fancy’s spring, but sorrow’s fall.

Raleigh’s point isn’t that it’s unpleasant to live in the country in winter; rather, he uses the natural metaphor as a way of describing the waning of passionate love. When Williams takes up these poems, he argues, instead, that the shepherd’s promises could never be fulfilled, regardless of the season and longevity of the shepherd’s passion. The second stanza reads,

> Though you praise us  
> and call to mind the poets  
> who sung of our loveliness  
> it was long ago!  
> long ago! when country people  
> would plow and sow with  
> flowering minds and pockets  
> at ease –  
> if ever this were true. (Collected 2 88)

The speaker contests whether the image of “country people / … with / flowering minds and pocket / at ease” was ever accurate; even if it was true, “it was long ago.” The phrase “minds and pockets / at ease” forces us to rethink what is implied by the leisurely life of pastoral characters. There are two kinds of leisure being imagined here. The first, “minds… at ease” refers to an understanding of rural labor that allows the pastoral genre to exist. In Renaissance theories of the pastoral genre, critics developed a strict set of rules about what kinds of workers were appropriate subjects for the genre. Thomas Rosenmeyer summarizes this classification in his study of the history of genre: “goatherds, shepherds, and cowherds” were appropriate figures, while “herders of pigs or horses, hunters, fishermen, laborers, and sailors” were not, because
“[p]igs are dirty; horses are not essential to the economy; hunters are never still enough; fisherman may not talk; and laborers and sailors work too hard” (7). Shepherds, because their work (when compared to hunters or fishermen, for example) does not require constant attention, are imagined to have “minds… at ease,” allowing them the leisure to make music and poems. But, “pockets / at ease” implies a very different kind of leisure, the forced leisure of unemployed. If a pocket is at ease, it isn’t being used; it’s empty. Williams makes the contradiction between “minds and pockets / at ease” explicitly in the final stanza, writing: “Empty pockets make empty heads” (19). That is, what looks like one kind of leisure (mental leisure) is, in fact, the other kind of leisure: unemployment. And, as the line indicates, “pockets at ease” is not only different from “minds at ease,” it in fact prevents mental leisure. That is, while pastoral poems, like Marlowe’s and Raleigh’s, imagine country people as always at ease, the truth is, they were always just poor.

What Williams’s use of the pastoral genre indicates is that certain kinds of aesthetic engagement are, in fact, founded on economic inequality. For the pastoral genre to function, you must admire the leisurely lives of shepherds, but you must also be able to ignore the cause of their leisure, just as the speaker of “Pastoral (When I was younger)” ignores the cause of the “bluish-green” “smeared” on the houses and possessions of the “very poor.” That aesthetic form masks “material [and] political” conditions is continuous with the formal argument of American Grain.

That is not to say that Williams thought poetry had no bearing on politics, nor politics on any bearing on poetry. He felt very strongly that the political environment of the United States would have an immense impact on the lives of American artists. But, on his account, that is not the same as believing that his poems would (or, rather, should) have any impact on the American
political environment. As he writes in “(Revolutions Revalued),” “[y]ou can’t use great art as propaganda—or any art. It will resist it” (103). Later, he elaborates on this point:

Poe is not to be made to write pro- or anti-slavery doggerel. Society would lose largely were this so. His significance lies in his power to fix, recordize, reassert in cryptographic form (only vaguely sensed at the moment as greatness—but full of accurate meaning for all that) to make a cryptogram of his time, in form and content—with the passionate *regenerative force* of the artist underlying it. (106)

The role of the artist, then, is not to assert this or that deeply held political position, but rather to produce, in his art, the “form and content” of the era, with a desire to regenerate it. The poet’s hoped-for regeneration, further, is only legible in retrospect—that is the force of describing the work of the artist as “cryptographic” and the message as “vaguely sensed at the moment.” That is, while Marlowe’s and Raleigh’s poetry presented shepherds as leisurely artists and lovers, it is not until these poems are returned to at a later date that their politics can be uncovered. So, while Williams does believe that the art object has direct relationship to the world—in its power to fix, record, and assert the historical context from which it emerges—he does not believe that any aesthetic project can simultaneously aim at specific political target.

4. The Dissonance is Discovery

It is here, then, that we return to the radium-credit section of *Paterson IV*, where Williams finally lays out the stakes of his cure for Dr. Paterson’s crisis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Money:</th>
<th>Uranium (bound to be lead)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>throws out the fire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the radium’s the credit […]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money sequestered enriches avarice, makes poverty: the direct cause of disaster while the leak drips</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let the fire out, let the wind go! Release the Gamma rays that cure the cancer the cancer, usury. Let credit out out from between the bars</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
before the bank windows (181–82)

Just as radium can cure cancer, Williams posits, the credit released by an adoption of the Social Credit plan, will cure economic cancer: usury. In early notes for this section William explains that Curie’s “splitting of the atom… has a literary meaning… in the splitting of the foot[. …]

Three discoveries here: 1. radium, 2. poet’s discovery of modern idiom, 3. political scientist’s discovery of a cure for economic ills.”14 As such, the credit-radium analogy also includes Williams’s theory of a prosody that “will be commensurate with the social, economic world we are living in as contrasted with the past” (“Field of Action” 53).

The analogy between the three ideas depends on their formal identity, which is derived from how they were discovered. First, radium, credit, and the new measure can only be gotten at after breaking open a seemingly inert substance—uranium, money, and traditional English prosody. Second, the discovery of the new, energetic substance is enabled by the recognition of a kind of dissonance. In the case of Curie, it is a “dissonance / in the valence of Uranium” that prompted Curie to “to dissect away / the block and leave / a separate metal” (P 175).15 For the Social Credit movement, the dissonance was in the price of a product when compared to its manufacturing costs. Sloganized as the A + B theorem, founder C. H. Douglas divided manufacturing costs into what he called real costs (A, which consists of raw material, plant, and labor) and bank costs (B, which consists of the interest payments, fees, and so on levied by the lending institution). According to Douglas, the portion of the price that goes to the A column is re-circulated in the economy, while the portion of the price in the B column is left in the bank’s vault: “[m]oney sequestered [behind]… the bank windows” (182). The seeming dissonance between the cost of manufacturing and cost for consumers led Douglas to the discovery of the A + B theorem. And, it is the dissonance between the spirit of the New World (felt by poets like
Poe, politicians like Burr, and explorers like Columbus, De Soto, and Boone) and the culture of the Old World that has led Williams to discover the new measure.

As I mentioned above, this section has been largely ignored by the critical tradition around the long poem. When it is addressed, it is often understood as an important, but highly personal, section of the poem. On one hand, Joseph Riddel and Benjamin Sankey find in *Paterson IV* important aspects of the design of *Paterson*. Riddel calls it an “exemplary exercise in analysis by juxtaposition”; Sankey argues that *Paterson IV* provides “several analogues for what poet does when he invents” (Riddel 238; Sankey 179). Sankey also agrees with my claim that the organizing logic of *Paterson IV* depends on a formal similarity between poetic invention, radium, and Social Credit, but he also believes that Williams means for all three solutions to be adopted. He writes, “[t]he reader may ask how seriously Williams means him to take the method of financing proposed [in *Paterson IV*]. The answer, I think, is pretty seriously” (189). Both Sankey and Conarroe argue that readers should understand the presentation of Social Credit as a genuine attempt to influence American economic policy, but the evidence they cite is not found within *Paterson*. Rather, both rely on Williams’s commitment to Social Credit in his personal life—as evidenced by his presentations to the Polytopics Club in Rutherford (Mariani 137), his participation in the American Social Credit Movement, and “(Revolutions Revalued),” which he delivered at the Institute for Public Affairs—to explain its presence in the poem. Sankey writes that “Williams accepted a version of [Social Credit] as the basis for his critique of the present system,” Conarroe that economics was “a subject about which Williams felt strongly, and since the sequence reveals the man and his world so thoroughly, containing evidence of his most passionately held convictions, it would be incomplete without this material” (Sankey 190, Conarroe 130). That is, for both Sankey and Conarroe, the value of the Social Credit material in
Book IV is not determined by its relationship to the unity of the poem. Sankey notes that Williams “does little [in Book IV] to ‘argue’ these policies”; the same could be said for his and Conarroe’s assertion that the credit section of Book IV is meant sincerely (189). There seems to be little formal evidence to suggest we should understand the Social Credit material as a plan worth adopting.

In fact, a careful reading of the final three pages of the section reveals how much ambivalence Williams injects into his presentation of Social Credit. For example, having compared credit to the Parthenon and money to “the gold entrusted to Phideas for the statues of Pallas Athena, that he ‘put aside’ for private purposes,” Williams concludes, “[y]ou can’t steal credit.” The next line, however, undoes the distinction between gold and credit: “let’s skip any reference, at this time, to the Elgin marbles” (183). Perhaps you can’t steal credit, but you absolutely can steal its products. Williams hedges, indicating that while Social Credit might cure some economic ills, it is by no means a cure-all.

Further, the section has a number of examples of Williams’s word play. For example, he writes, “Money : Joke / could be wiped out / at stroke / of pen / and was when / gold and pound were / devalued” (184). The historical reference here is to the financial shock, experienced in the United Kingdom, when the gold standard was reinstated in 1925, which devalued the pound sterling. “Pound” has a second meaning, though, referring also to the “devaluation” of Pound, which left him imprisoned at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital for thirteen years. But this too is ambivalent: while Pound certainly had been “devalued” by the American government following the treason charges, he was highly valued in literary circles, having won the Bollingen Prize in 1949, just two years before Paterson IV was published. The ambivalence in this passage suggests, very subtly, that the work of “wip[ing] out” money has already been done, slyly
attributing it both to the devastating monetary policies of the U.K. during the interwar years and to Pound’s tireless (one is tempted to write “incessant”) efforts to inform his readers, Williams included, about monetary theory.

There is too much playfulness in this section for us to understand Paterson IV as a serious proposal for financial reform. Further, when Williams returns to the theme in Paterson V, he seems to do so for the express purpose of undermining whatever shred of sincerity the earlier section might have had. A long excerpt from one of Pound’s letter begins, “Is there anything in Ac Bul 2/ vide enc that seems cloudy to you or INComprehensible?” (215). The letter goes on to discuss economics in the vein that readers of Pound would be familiar with: he makes fun of those who disagree with his economic policies (“The hardest thing to discover is WHY someone else, apparently not an ape or a Roosevelt cannot understand something as simple as 2 plus 2 makes four”); professional economists are engaged in “banditry”; “[w]ars are made to make debt”; a critique of central banking; and so on. There are two things—beyond Pound’s economics—about the letter that are “incomprehensible.” The first is that, without the benefit of the full title of the enclosed text, it isn’t possible for the reader to make any judgment about its clarity. The second is the letter’s placement: wedged between a Sapphic translation and a love poem to the “woman in our town” to whom the poet dedicates Paterson, Pound’s economic missive feels completely out of place (216). The fact that it is the only mention of the economic motif in Paterson V and it is now explicitly connected to the discredited Pound seems to indicate that Williams felt readers did not sufficiently understand the purpose of its presence in Paterson IV. It was not, as the critics who addressed the section have argued, the expression of a deeply held political belief. Instead, it serves as the central element in the three-part analogy between radium, credit, and the new measure.
The new measure is the prosodic equivalent of radium and credit; discovered by noticing a central dissonance and then breaking open an inert substance, it is the radiant element in poetry that might regenerate American society. The new measure, a relative system of counting stress in the poetic line, is most usually contained within the triadic line, a three line system in which the second and third lines start further from the left margin than the lines that proceed it. Here is Williams’s explanation of it from his 1954 essay “A New Measure”:

(1) Mother of God! Our Lady!
    (2) the heart
        (3) is an unruly master:
    (4) Forgive us our sins
        (5) as we
        (6) forgive
    (7) those who sinned against (50)

Williams explains, “[c]ount a single beat to each numeral. You may not agree with my ear, but that is the way I count the line. Over the whole poem it gives a pattern to the meter that can be felt as a new measure” (“Measure” 50). To explain it another way, each line is a “single beat,” which means that each line is measured the same as the others. So, “Mother of God! Our Lady!” has the same duration as “forgive.”

There has been much debate about the new measure and triadic line in Williams criticism, often spurred by the contradictions found when comparing the practice of the new measure and how Williams described in in essays and letters. I won’t enter into the debate here, as it doesn’t much matter for our purposes how Williams composed the new measure, nor how he understood its structure. What matters instead is its use within *Paterson*. Although most critics don’t recognize the triadic line as fully developed until *Pictures from Breughel* and *Asphodel: That Greeny Flower*, it makes its first appearance in the opening of *Paterson II*. It reads, in part:

    The descent beckons
as the ascent beckoned
   Memory is a kind
of accomplishment
    a sort of renewal
      even
an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new
    places
      inhabited by hordes
        heretofore unrealized
    of new kinds—
      since their movements
        are towards new objectives
    (even though formerly they were abandoned)

No defeat is made up entirely of defeat—
the world it opens is always a place
  formerly
    unsuspected. A
world lost,
  a world unsuspected
    beckons to new places
and no whiteness (lost) is so white as the memory
of whiteness . (78)

Although these lines appear well before Dr. Paterson’s suicidal crisis, they speak directly to it:
“the descent” into nature “beckons” him. But, the beckoning is overpowered by a retreat into
memory, which foreshadows Dr. Paterson’s turn to the library in *Book III*. It is his escape into
the past to discover new “hordes” and “formerly unsuspected” places that prevents him from
attempting a pure reconciliation with nature and the female. The attention to the past reinforces
the centrality of American history to the project: it is only through answering to the past that we
can find the solution the problems of the present. As we saw already, the past is personified in
*Paterson* as Hamilton, whose legacy must be finally defeated to regenerate American culture.

The tripartite structure seems to mirror the thesis-antithesis-synthesis structure proposed
in *American Grain*. But, as this section attests, Williams rarely closes a thought on the third line:
the first set ends with “Memory is a kind,” requiring the reader to move to the second set to
determine the meaning of “kind”; likewise, the fifth set ends with “unsuspecting. A,” again
forcing the reader into the next set to resolve the line. Each set spills over into the next, moving readers quickly down the page and back to the left margin as they read. As such, it refuses the solution proposed by *In the American Grain*: reconciliation is not the goal.

The goal of the new measure, I argue, is the destruction of aesthetic hierarchy. Structurally, it depends on a relative measuring of the stress in a metrical arrangement. Rather than assigning each line a particular number of stressed and unstressed syllables—as traditional English prosody does—Williams counts each line as a single beat. As a result, “even” (the sixth line in the passage above) is given the same stress as every other line. Whether intentional or not, the choice that “even” be the first one-word line of this new way of measuring functions as an explanation of the relationship between the three lines in each set. At the same time, it formalizes the anti-hierarchical method that the content of *Paterson* explores. By revising the way prosodic stress is measured, Williams points to a way of measuring that is radically anti-hierarchical. Measuring, especially in poetry in English, is a way of assigning value—determining, for example, that we stress “be” and not “to” in Hamlet’s famous soliloquy. By refusing to value any word more or less than any other and instead to value the line, Williams formally enacts the destruction of hierarchy that library fire enacts in *Paterson III*.

It is important, however, to note that this is, for Williams, a purely cultural politics. The solution offered by *Paterson*, as promised in *American Grain*, is an aesthetic solution, not a material one. Although he was famously anti-academic, it is not the case that he believed that the wholesale destruction of libraries would right the wrongs of American history. Rather, what is proposed here is a formal method for rethinking structures of valuation. As the Beautiful Thing and Alexander Hamilton demonstrate in the poem, the problem in American culture is a problem of valuing: the wrong things, such as the economic success of one part of the nation, are given
great value. The new measure offers an aesthetic way of measuring value. Williams’s ambivalence toward Social Credit in *Paterson IV* indicates that he does not believe there is an economic or political program available that does the same work. Instead, it points to the method—a careful examination of dissonance, not the hasty reconciliation of difference—by which such a political solution might be arrived at.
Notes to Chapter 2

1 Of course, since scholars have been able to study the manuscripts, we know that much of this section isn’t an imitation of Pound, but Ol’ Ez himself, as Williams included a number of his letters in the radium-credit section and, as I shall have more to say about below, in *Paterson V*.

2 As Lisa Siraganian so adeptly summarizes it in her recent book on the metaphor of the frame in modernist literature and art, “criticism of [Williams’s] work since the 1960s has largely… shift[ed] between a materialism that rejects the frame and a formalism that requires it,” citing David Markos’s, J. Hillis Miller’s, Joseph Riddel’s, and Henry Sayre’s work (90). That is, the body of work around Williams’s poetry tends to take one of two positions: either Williams rejects the notion of the frame, which separates the poem from the world, understanding his poetry as having a direct effect on or relationship to the world, or he embraces the formal possibilities enabled by the frame, insisting that the readings of the poem do “not arrive at a place outside the poem” (Riddel 21).

3 Wallace Stevens famously described the “anti-poetic” as Williams’s “passion” in his preface to *Collected Poems, 192–1931* (Stevens 63).

4 This is how Marjorie Perloff understands it, certainly. In *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, she argues that *Paterson*, with its complete “symbolic superstructure” (Paterson—the city and the man; nature—the woman) is in direct contradiction to his earlier work (most crucially for her, *Spring and All*) which sought to “remov[e…] the metaphoric and symbolic associations words have” (148, 114).

5 Atabalipa is the hispanicized spelling of “Atahualpa,” who was the emperor of the Inca before Spanish conquest. Yupaha was thought to be a mythical Maya city, but recent archeological work has produced evidence that the Maya may have, in fact, settled in Northern Georgia. The Chiaha people lived in east Tennessee.

6 Assumption, of course, refers to Hamilton’s plan, opposed by Madison and Jefferson, to have the federal government assume the debts incurred by individual states during the Revolutionary War. The plan would not only create stronger ties between the states and the federal government, but would also give the Federal government “powers of taxation” to pay back the debt.

7 This section echoes the quotation Pound attributed to the founders of the Bank of England. See Chapter 1, pages **. Williams adapted this material from Social Credit propaganda sent to him by Clara Studer (*Paterson* 273).

8 The description of the young girls is taken from a section of “The Wanderer” that describes the Paterson Silk Strike of 1913. Ann Mikkelsen points out that *Paterson II*, in early drafts, was much more focused on the Silk Strike (85).

9 In fact, the dust jacket description for *Paterson III* Williams composed seems to indicate that he thought that was the direction of the text as well: “The brunt of the four books if *Paterson*… is a search for the redeeming language by which a man’s premature death, like the death of Mrs. Cumming in Book I, and the woman’s (the man’s) failure to hold him (her) might have been prevented” (qtd. in Copestake 100). In this description, it seems as if the “redeeming language” sought by the poet is subordinated to his desire to keep marriages together.

10 Persephone is a recurrent figure in Williams, embodying renewal and return. *Kora in Hell* takes Persephone as its major figure. She appears, both explicitly and by allusion, in *Spring and All* and *The Descent of Winter*. Williams presents another female figure to whom Dr. Paterson dedicates all his work in *Book V* (216–218).

11 For a more detailed reading of this, see Aldon Lynn Nieslon’s *Reading Race*.

12 Williams also relies of stereotypes about non-white sexuality in *Paterson* and *American Grain*. *American Grain*’s depiction of the New World depends on assumptions about the sexual liberation of the indigenous American people. This is carried over into *Paterson I*, where Dr. Paterson recalls an image from *National Geographic* of an African chief with his nine wives, ordered from oldest to youngest, and *Paterson IV*, where he observes the President of
Haiti escaping with his “blonde secretary” (13, 190). As such, Williams takes part in a modernist discourse on race that is no longer acceptable. While Williams celebrates these figures—making him, on the whole, more progressive than many of his cohort—his celebration depends on racialized assumptions about the difference between white and non-white sexuality.

The articulation of the gender binary in familial structures has, of course, developed over time, moving from multi-generational family units into the nineteenth century to the nuclear family of high Fordism and into new arrangements, where all aspects of reproductive labor, from childbirth and care to housecleaning, cooking, and nursing can be outsourced. Silvia Federici’s work has analyzed an early instance of this transition, revealing feminine resistance to the destruction of the commons and the imposition of a capitalist logic on domestic labor. The authors of *Endnotes* highlight the way in which our ideas of “femininity” and “masculinity” derive from the Fordist era, as that was the era in which men and women took up the roles of, respectively, father-husband-wage-earner and mother-wife-unpaid-laborer in the most individuated way. Roswitha Scholz captures an ongoing transition in this process, highlighting the “redistribution of… personal care and nursing within the female plane of existence,” so that “well situated women” hire “underpaid immigrant female laborers” to perform the reproductive activities they are no longer able to perform (137). For those poorly situated, much of this reproductive labor has been performed by the state in the form of public education, universalized health care, and old-age insurance. Austerity measures in the United States and the Eurozone are cutting into the state’s role as provider of reproductive labor, replacing public with private services. As a result, only the well-situated will be able to afford to outsource reproductive labor, and we will find people—perhaps not women, but those whose labor is the least valuable outside the home—again confined to the unpaid and unvalued sphere of reproductive labor. While Silvia Federici finds great potential in this situation, as it would allow women to reorganize reproductive labor, there is much to be feared about a return to Fordist, or pre-Fordist, gendered labor arrangements.

This is found in Williams’s notes for *Book III*, held in the SUNY Buffalo archives. The passage is also cited in John Malcolm Brinnin, *William Carlos Williams and Albert Gelpi, A Coherent Splendor: The American Poetic Renaissance, 1910–1950*.

For a clear explanation of the science behind the discovery of radium, see Walter Scott Peterson, *An Approach to Paterson*, 195–196.

For a comprehensive review of the various positions taken with regard to the structure and composition of the new measure, see Eleanor Berry, “William Carlos Williams’ Triadic-Line Verse: An Analysis of its Prosody.”
Dido’s Secret:
The Atlantic Slave Trade in the Present

Amiri Baraka promised the audiences of his “Revolutionary Theatre” that they would see “actual explosions and actual brutality,” “that when the final curtain goes down brains [will be]… splattered over the seats and the floor” (“Revolutionary” 3, 2). He justifies the violent aesthetic with an appeal to realism: the Revolutionary Theatre will “show what the facts are” while bourgeois theatre, he writes, only “shows tired white lives, and the problems of eating white sugar, or else it herds bigcaboosed blondes onto huge stages in rhinestones and makes believe they are dancing or singing” (2).¹ The falseness of bourgeois theatre corresponds to “the spiritual values of this unholy society, which sends young crackers all over the world blowing off colored people’s heads” (2). The Revolutionary Theatre, in contrast, is the theater of “World Spirit”; it opposes the values of bourgeois theatre and the society that produces it with “Force. Spirit. Feeling.” As such, the project of the Revolutionary Theatre is, explicitly, ethical and aesthetic: Baraka writes, “Wittgenstein said ethics and aesthetics are one. I believe this” (2). The “actual brutality” Baraka envisions on the Revolutionary Theatre’s stage corresponds to the “actual brutality” of the facts off-stage; likewise, the characters’ discovery of “Force. Spirit. Feeling” will correspond to a spiritual and revolutionary awakening in the audience. The article specifically references three of Baraka’s plays—The Dutchman, The Toilet, and The Slave. But none of these end with “brains… splattered over the seats.”

That is not to say that those plays are not violent: The Dutchman ends with a white woman murdering a black man on the subway and preparing to murder another; The Toilet culminates in a brutal fist-fight between two lovers; and The Slave, although a living room drama, is set against the background of a violent race revolt. But this violence stays on stage.
not until *Slave Ship: An Historical Pageant*, first performed at the Spirit House Theatre (Newark) in 1967, that Baraka produces a play that closes with “brains… splattered over the seats.” The brutality on stage is played out in three sections that represent the Middle Passage, slavery, and the Civil Rights movement, culminating in a successful race rebellion. Each section has its own violent set piece: during the Middle Passage, a captive woman kills her infant and then herself; in the slavery section, Nat Turner’s revolution is viciously put down; and, in the final section, an Uncle Tom preacher calls for integration while ignoring the murder of black children. The central claim of the play is that the history of black oppression is, in fact, the history of white violence. And so, at the end of the play, the black characters meet this centuries-long history of violence with their own, murdering the preacher before heading off-stage to destroy white power.

Following the revolution, the audience is encouraged to participate in an emancipatory celebration. The stage directions read, “Lights come up abruptly, and people on stage begin to dance, same hip Boogalooyoruba, fingerpop, skate, monkey, dog… Enter audience; get members of audience to dance… Turns into an actual party…” (145). The characters’ celebration becomes the audience’s celebration, bringing the happy resolution of *Slave Ship* off the stage and into the theatre. But this happiness is interrupted: “When the party reaches some loose improvisation… audience relaxed, somebody throws the preacher’s head into center of floor, that is, after dancing starts for real. Then black” (145). No production I’ve found record of or seen video of follows this stage direction. This is a shame, because, at least on my reading, the preacher’s decapitated head interrupting the “actual party” with “actual brutality” is the whole point of *Slave Ship*, if not the Revolutionary Theatre: without this, no “brains [are] splattered over seats.” That said, it is also the point at which the aesthetics and ethics of the project begin to self-destruct. The one-to-
one correspondence between the “facts” on- and off-stage that Baraka hoped to produce collapses, so that the “actual violence” promised by Baraka becomes once again virtual, only now more obviously so, as the prop head is available for close inspection. Further, the murder of a black preacher confronts the audience with an image of indiscriminate violence, suggesting that the race war that will end the long history of white-on-black violence will require some amount of black-on-black violence.

At the same time that the preacher’s head calls into question the realist aesthetics and revolutionary ethics of Slave Ship, it also undoes the historical argument of the play, which is the assertion that white hatred is the cause of black oppression and suffering. Throughout the play, the white characters take pleasure in watching black people suffer. The sailors who man the slave ship in the opening section “laugh and point, as if they were pointing at the filth, misery and degradation of the Black People… When they are outlined again they are rolling in merriment. Pointing, dancing, jumping up and down” (135). The laughter continues up until the revolutionaries are successful. As such, the play presents white people not only as racist, but virulently and violently so. The white characters in Slave Ship hate the black characters so much, they “roll[…] in merriment” when they suffer. As such, racism becomes a marker of whiteness. But the figure of the preacher complicates Baraka’s relatively simplified take on racial tension in the U.S.

The final section begins with the preacher addressing a disembodied voice that represents white power:

Yasss, we understand… the problem. And, personally, I think some agreement can be reached. We will be nonviolenk… to the last… because we understand the dignity of Pruty McBonk and the Greasy Ghost. Of course diddy rip to bink, of vout juice. And penguins would do the same. I have a trauma that the gold sewers won’t integrate. (142, ellipses in original)
Despite his nonsense references to “Pruty McBonk,” “the Greasy Ghost,” and penguins, it’s clear that the preacher represents Civil Rights leaders who call for a non-violent response to segregation. Baraka’s presentation of the preacher’s position gives away his opinion of these moderate politics. But the critique goes further in the next moment, when the preacher is interrupted by the screams of a woman off-stage, calling for her child Moshake—the same screams that came just before the infant’s murder at the hands of his mother aboard the slave ship in the first section. After her screams have subsided, a man, carrying the corpse of a child, enters and sets the body down at the preacher’s feet. The corpse presented to the preacher is not Moshake’s: it is “from a blown-up church” (142). Baraka here connects the violence of the Middle Passage with the violence of the early 1960s.

The appearance of the child’s corpse—a corpse that both is and is not the body of the child strangled during the Middle Passage—is emblematic of the primary narrative technique Baraka uses to connect the three sections of the play. Rather than presenting slavery and the present as distinct, Baraka makes them continuous: the violence motivated by race hatred that destroys black lives in 1967 is the same violence that destroyed them in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The continuity is reinforced by the use of the same actors across all three time periods. As Stefan Brecht wrote in a review of a 1970 production of the play, *Slave Ship* argues that its black audiences are “still on that boat” (218).

When the preacher is confronted by this history in the form of the infant’s corpse, he refuses to acknowledge it. Instead, he “tries to push the baby’s body behind him [with his foot], grinning, and jeffing, all the time, showing teeth, and being ‘dignified’” (142). He starts speaking to the white voice again: “We Kneegrows are ready to integrate” (*ibid.*). The sequence argues that integration is only possible if historical and contemporary violence is ignored. The
preacher’s refusal to acknowledge white violence is what sparks the final revolution, culminating in the preacher’s “brains… splattered over [the] seats.”

But at the same time that this moment serves as a catalyst for the black figures to rise up against white oppression, it complicates and deconstructs the racial binary that the play has so far depicted. The black preacher is evidence that the white figures of the play aren’t the only ones willing to see black people suffer. While the preacher does not share the white figures’ humor at the suffering of black people, he does grin and jeff while pushing the baby’s body behind him. Further, the preacher’s behavior offers a competing account of slavery and Jim Crow. The production notes call for the same actor to play the preacher and an Uncle Tom slave who, in the second section, betrays Nat Turner’s revolution for an extra pork chop. While Baraka never makes it clear what the preacher is after, the fact that same actor plays both roles tempts the audience to conflate their motivations. Admittedly, there is no difference for the victims whether their betrayer was motivated by race-hatred, hunger, or anything else. But it does matter for the historical argument Baraka is trying to make. If, up until this point, the explanation offered for the oppression of black subjects was pure hatred, the Tom character’s behavior in the second and third sections calls that into question. As such, the murder of the black preacher reveals that the end of *Slave Ship* isn’t race war; rather, it is a war against those—white and black—who would not assist in the liberation of black U.S. citizens.

It is then not very surprising that Baraka quickly revised his position; *The Motion of History*, which provides a much more nuanced view of slavery, rebellion against white oppression, and the possibility of a class alliance across racial lines, does not deconstruct itself in the final moments. As such, it is tempting to read *Slave Ship* more as an artifact—an example of a particular set of beliefs about both the political potentials of theater and the response demanded
by a racist society. My contention, however, is that the techniques Baraka relies on in *Slave Ship* have been carried forward into contemporary filmic representations of slavery, namely in *Django Unchained* and *12 Years a Slave*. They too aim to produce “actual brutality” on the screen. But this element of Baraka’s Revolutionary Theatre has been sanitized, so that rather than inciting political action, these films produce complacency with a system of racial and economic domination that has intensified following the Great Recession. In the final section of the chapter, I will turn to *Zong!*, a 2011 poem by M. NourbeSe Philip, that presents the Atlantic slave trade and its contemporary resonances as the product of economic and political structures that the other representations of slavery efface: their preference for a violent image of the slave system masks the economic motivations of those engaged in the slave trade. As a result, *Zong!* makes visible a different historical continuity than the one Baraka, Tarantino, and McQueen present. For Philip, the violence endured by New World Africans from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries is the form of appearance of a legal and economic system foundational to European Society.

1. Dupes All

In 2013, Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* was nominated, but did not win, the Academy Award for Best Motion Picture. A year later, Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* won the award *Django* failed to.4 While in many ways these two films could not be more different, they share important characteristics with each other and with *Slave Ship*: namely a violent aesthetic that portrays slavery as a system of white violence. But, rather than indicting all whites—as *Slave Ship* does—*Django* and *12 Years* separate the white characters into two categories: cartoonishly cruel slave-owners and enlightened foreigners. By discarding the radical race position held by Baraka, they frame slavery as a problem with individuals, rather than a
problem with an economic system.\textsuperscript{5} Such an understanding of slavery can only produce a happy ending for the individual: Django and Broomhilda can ride off together, and Solomon Northrup can return to his family, but the system of slavery persists. As we shall see, this revision to the \textit{Slave Ship} formula turns a radical statement about race in the United States into a meditation on history that is perfectly compatible with neoliberal ideology.

The films’ violence probably isn’t surprising for viewers familiar with either director’s previous work. Tarantino’s blood and gore aesthetic is amplified by even more explosive than usual effects: a gun shot to the knee sends a liter of blood spraying across the walls; a shotgun blast propels a woman backwards and out of frame. Before the spectacular final shoot-out, \textit{Django} confronts its viewers with whippings, Mandingo fights, forced prostitution, and, in a decisive moment, the use of dogs to tear apart a runaway slave.

McQueen has a more realist approach to violence. He accomplishes this in \textit{12 Years} by using long takes and sacrificing narrative development for an almost lyrical attention to violence. Both the famous whipping scene and an earlier sequence, in which Northrup is half-hung from a tree until his owner can decide whether to let him live or die, are examples of McQueen’s lyrical interest in the violence of slavery. These sequences are exemplary of the way McQueen has departed from his source material to evoke a particular affective response in the audience.\textsuperscript{6} The film excised the sections of Northrup’s memoir that provide lengthy explanations of how plantation farming worked. While this material was appropriate to the original, as part of its purpose was to educate Northerners about plantation life. McQueen seems to be utterly uninterested in the economics of slavery or the labor of slaves, preferring to educate his audience of about only one part of plantation life: the violent means by which slave-owners controlled their slaves. For example, while on board the \textit{Orleans} from Washington to the slave market,
Northrup and two other men plot a slave revolt. In the book, they never follow through with the plan, because one of their number, Robert, dies of smallpox. In the film, this character is replaced by an unnamed man played by Michael K. Williams. When we first meet him, he is wearing a metal mask that also serves as a gag. Rather than dying from illness, he is stabbed while protecting a woman on the boat from a rapacious sailor. These imported details are surely historically plausible. What they indicate, however, is that McQueen’s film is most interested in the violence, and not the economics, of the slave system. Or, as Adolph Reed Jr. argues in his article on *Django Unchained*, “[i]t’s as if… slavery had nothing to do with making slave owners rich” (2). Instead, both *Django* and *12 Years* want to show slavery as having everything to do with violence. And, as in *Slave Ship*, the violence is meted out by racist white people.

The antagonist in *Django*, Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio), initially appears as comic relief. His Franco-philia is a subplot throughout: he demands to be addressed as *Monsieur* Candie and names his slaves after characters from French novels, but he doesn’t speak French and does not know that Alexandre Dumas was black. These jokes elevate Django’s white partner, Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz), making the slave-owner appear stupid and uneducated. The lightness with which Candie is first portrayed masks his true cruelty. Realizing Schultz and Django have tricked him, Candie gives a long speech about phrenology and the scientifically demonstrable servility of black people, before smashing a skull with a hammer (echoing the first Mandingo fight, where Candie’s fighter kills the other with a hammer to the head).

Tarantino’s attention to the violence of slavery and cruelty of Candie is in the service of producing, like *Inglorious Basterds*, a historically revisionist revenge fantasy. Both depend on Tarantino having located historical figures that contemporary audiences don’t object to seeing
brutalized: Nazis and slavers. While slavery provides an appropriately violent and morally reprehensible setting for the scene of spectacular violence that closes the film, *Django* does not claim to make any statement on the contemporary status of black Americans.

In contrast, McQueen explicitly states that he was motivated to make the film because of current events. He finds returning to slavery vitally important, particularly because of... the election of a black President, the 150 years anniversary of the abolition of slavery, the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, the unfortunate Trayvon Martin situation, the rolling back of voting rights. I think there’s never been a better time... to look at the recent past, in order to go forward. (Rich)

On McQueen’s account, then, there is a link between slavery and the racial climate in the U.S. in the twenty-first century. Of course, *Slave Ship* made the same argument: the black audience members are “still on that boat” that carried their ancestors to the slave markets. But, as I shall now argue, the changes McQueen makes to Baraka’s formula in *Slave Ship* render such a link between the “recent past” of slavery and contemporary racial oppression and violence absurd.

While *Slave Ship* posited that white cruelty was responsible for both slavery and Jim Crow, *12 Years a Slave* posits that certain whites—now long dead—were responsible for slavery, while other whites were responsible for its abolishment.

*12 Years*’s understanding of slavery as a problem caused by individuals is perhaps most obvious in the way the relationship between Patsey and Edwin Epps in the film differs from how it appeared in the memoir. In both, Patsey is the most productive field-worker on the plantation, often picking over five hundred pounds of cotton a day. She is also Epps’s unwilling mistress. In the memoir, her owner’s attention to her draws the wrath of Mistress Epps. As Northrup explains, “Epps would quiet [his wife] at last with a promise that Patsey should be flogged—a promise he was sure to keep” (288). Mistress Epps regularly begs her husband to sell Patsey, but her economic usefulness provides cover for him to keep her on the plantation.¹⁰ In the film, Epps
whips Patsey not to appease his wife, but because of his unfounded belief that she is also the mistress of a neighboring plantation owner. As such, the relationship between Patsey and Epps in the movie becomes more difficult to explain than it is in the source material. There, he was cruel to her to maintain his marriage; in McQueen’s version, his cruelty is tied up in his love and desire for her. Further, the brutal whipping defies the economic logic of slavery: it will take days, if not weeks, for Patsey to recover from her whipping, impacting the profitability of the plantation. The irrationality and cruelty Epps displays might produce an interesting portrait of desire and sadism. But to do so, it must subordinate the ruling logic of slavery—the economic benefit of owning, rather than renting, labor—to an irrational desire for and hatred of slaves.\footnote{11}

But this brings us to the central difference between \textit{Slave Ship} and the two films, which is the difference between understanding the resistance to oppression as a collective struggle and understanding it as an individual one. This difference takes on a number of different forms of appearance in the contemporary films, all of which draw the audience’s attention to, in the words of Reed, “the generic story of individual triumph over adversity” (18).

The first form of this difference is in the portrayal of white people. Baraka does not present a single sympathetic white character in \textit{Slave Ship}: they all enjoy the suffering of black people. But this is not the case in \textit{12 Years or Django}. In both, a central white character is at least partially responsible for the protagonist’s freedom. Interestingly, neither is American. In \textit{12 Years}, it is the Canadian carpenter Bass (Brad Pitt) who finally gets a letter to Northrup’s friends and family in New York; in \textit{Django}, it is Schultz, a German bounty hunter, who saves Django from a chain gang, frees him, and makes him his partner.\footnote{12} Further, in both the film and book of \textit{12 Years a Slave}, William Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch in the movie) is portrayed as relatively kind.\footnote{13} The presence of sympathetic white characters means that neither film can produce the
racial confrontation that closes *Slave Ship*. Instead, both films end with the protagonist’s escape from slavery, his removal from (or, in the case of *Django*, his removal of) the individuals who are responsible for his condition. As such, they do not end with the end of slavery, but with the end of the protagonist’s experience of slavery. This is not presented as the protagonist’s failure: both Northrup’s return to New York and Django’s and Broomhilda’s ride off into the moonlight are happy endings. As Reed writes about *Django*, “Django’s quest is entirely individualist; he never intends to challenge slavery and never does” (3). The same is true for Northrup.

Along these same lines, while the black characters in *Slave Ship* are purposefully de-individuated, the protagonists of *12 Years* and *Django* are, to borrow from Monsieur Candie, “one in ten thousand”: both men are set apart from the other black characters. In *12 Years*, Northrup’s difference from the other slaves—that he was born in the North—allows him to function as a surrogate for the audience. Every aspect of slavery is new to Northrup, just as it is for the viewers. (Schultz provides the same perspective in *Django*; as a German immigrant, he has never seen slavery.) Further, Northrup possesses skills many slaves were actively prevented from learning—reading and writing—as well as those gained from his life as a wage-laborer. This separates him from the rest of the slaves, as he is often used as a skilled laborer, rather than a field hand. Django is even more exceptional: he’s a freeman bounty hunter, making thousands of dollars killing white people. His wife, Broomhilda von Shaft, is fluent in German and can also read and write. And, as her last name indicates, at least one of her descendants is destined to be exceptional in his own right. While *Slave Ship* tells the story of a collective struggle against collective oppression, both *12 Years* and *Django* tell the story of an individual struggle against an individual oppressor.

This is not meant as a criticism of real historical figures, like Solomon Northrup, who
fight for their freedom from slavery. Rather, it is meant to highlight the ways in which the portrayals of slavery in these contemporary films are compatible with the neoliberal emphasis on the individual. As Reed writes,

> the imagery of the individual overcoming odds to achieve fame, success, or recognition also maps onto the fantasy of limitless upward mobility for enterprising and persistent individuals who persevere and remain true to their dreams. As such, it is neoliberalism’s version of an ideal of social justice, legitimizing both success and failure as products of individual character. (18–19)

The fact that both Northrup and Django are differentiated from the other slaves by their skills as, respectively, a carpenter and a marksman, further plays into neoliberal claims about the centrality of the individual, and the relative unimportance of social forces, to success.

In this way, the difference between *Slave Ship* and the two films illustrates one part of the argument put forth by Jodi Melamud in *Represent and Destroy*. There, she argues that the movement to incorporate cultural products of non-white artists into the literary canon has been always in service of whatever version of anti-racism most successfully bolstered U.S. capital. *Represent and Destroy* traces three eras of liberal and neoliberal antiracism, from the racial liberalism of the post-war boom to the liberal multiculturalism put in place by the canon wars and the neoliberal multiculturalism of our present moment. The move from the race radicalism of *Slave Ship* and the neoliberalism of *12 Years a Slave* and *Django Unchained*, when read through Melamud’s argument, helps us understand the political and economic consequences of this transition.

In the opening to this chapter, I pointed readers to Baraka’s projected “Revolutionary Theatre,” which would use the avant-garde techniques of participatory theater to incite an actual revolution in the audience. This aligns Baraka’s project with the tactics of other antiracist social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. As Melamud explains:
An idea of culture as powerful and transformative was key to many of the post-1964 movements. Such thinking proceeded from a definition of culture as a materializing social process, productive of relatively permanent forms of value, economy, meaning, and distribution of goods and resources. For radical antiracisms both cultural and political activism was seen as the practice of liberation, of bringing a transformed world into concrete being by performatively (re)constituting communal life. (94)

As we saw with Slave Ship, these radical works of art were believed to be one method by which a better world could be obtained. The better world is founded on a revolution in the “forms of value, economy, meaning, and distribution of goods and services.” This is another version of Baraka’s claim that his Revolutionary Theatre would provide a different system of values than those produced by “this unholy society.”

“Dominant or official antiracisms,” as Melamud calls those movements compatible with state- and capital-sanctioned equality movements, also value culture. But they understand “U.S. state and social institutions [as]… perfectly sound” (101). What the aesthetic objects are understood to repair is the behavior of individuals, not the system. Or, the structure of U.S. society is not the problem, the people inside it are. Django Unchained’s and 12 Years a Slave’s focus on the individual effaces the structures that produced such individuals. Slave Ship offers a structural critique, albeit a flawed one. While it mistakenly locates the structural contradiction in race rather than in the economic system, its focus is on the way social structures continue to violently oppress black Americans. Django and 12 Years find no structural contradiction in slavery. Instead, they posit slavery as a problem caused by and experienced by some individuals. As such, they endorse a political program that praises successful individuals and condemns unsuccessful individuals as cover for the continuation of an economic system that profits from racial segregation and oppression.
2. The Me in Become; the Law in Os

I want to turn now to M. NourbeSe Philip’s poem *Zong!*, published in 2012. Unlike the three representations of slavery I’ve covered so far, Philip’s poem rejects racism as an explanation for slavery, instead situating the figures of the poem in a matrix of economic, legal, and social forces that not only describes the conditions of possibility for the Atlantic slave trade but also reveals the continuity between the eighteenth century and the present. The poem is made from language taken from *Gregson v. Gilbert*, a 1783 civil suit brought by the owners of the slave ship *Zong* against their insurance company. The facts of the case, as presented by the plaintiff, were that Luke Collingwood, the inexperienced captain of the *Zong*, finding himself a month from port and with dwindling water supplies, had approximately 130 of the captive Africans thrown overboard. According to the defense, the ship’s delay was caused by Collingwood’s inexperience (he mistook Jamaica for unfriendly Hispaniola, navigating the ship off-course); they were never as far from port as they said; and, perhaps most damningly, rain on the second day of the three-day massacre replenished their water supply. A jury trial initially found the insurance company liable to pay, but they appealed; *Gregson v. Gilbert*, which is the decision from the retrial hearing, found that “a sufficient necessity did not exist for throwing the negroes overboard” (Philip 210). As Lord Mansfield writes in his concurring opinion:

> There is no evidence of the ship being foul and leaky, and that certainly was not the cause of the delay. There is weight, also, in the circumstance of the throwing overboard of the negroes after the rain (if the fact be so), for which, upon the evidence, there appears to have been no necessity. (211)

Finding the defense’s account of the events more credible, the justices posit a more likely explanation for the massacre: “finding they should have a bad market for their slaves, they took these means [the massacre] of transferring the loss from the owners to the underwriters” (211). That is, the plaintiff failed to prove that the massacre was necessary for the survival of crew,
ship, and the rest of the cargo. In the author’s note accompanying Zong!, Philip explains that we shouldn’t be surprised that the case rests on whether or not the court could find “sufficient necessity” to justify the murders. She writes:

The basic tool in the study of law is case analysis. This process requires a careful sifting of the reported case to find the kernel of the legal principle at the heart of the decision—the ratio decidendi or simply the ratio. Having isolated that, all our opinion becomes obiter dicta, informally referred to as dicta. Which is what the Africans aboard the Zong becomes—dicta, footnotes, related to, but not, the ratio.17 (199)

While the justices were aware that there is something else at stake in Gregson v. Gilbert, a belief perhaps motivated by abolitionist Granville Sharpe’s persistent attempts to have the case reheard, they can only, “wisely or unwisely,” consider the ratio decidendi. The narrow ratio of Gregson v. Gilbert—the one “kernel” of law—cannot take the dicta into account. But, the decision indicates that the dicta is still on the justices’ minds: whether it be the defensive opening of the dissenting opinion (“It has been decided, whether wisely or unwisely is not now the question, that a portion of our fellow-creatures may become the subject of property. This [act], therefore, was a throwing overboard of goods”) or the decisive statement from concurring Justice Buller (“the law respecting indictments for murder does not apply”), the question of the morality, but not the legality, of the massacre is raised throughout the decision (211).

It is in the tension between the ratio and dicta that Philip situates her poem. She does this both on the level of form and content. By using the words of the decision as source material, eventually breaking the official vocabulary open to find words from Arabic, Fon, French, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Latin, Portuguese, Spanish, Shona, Twi, West Africa Patois, and Yoruba secreted within, Philip discovers a counter-language at the center of the legal decision. At the same time, by considering the material conditions of the sailors who carried out the massacre and putting it in the context of a newly emergent form of trade and finance, Philip discovers a
counter-history. The language and history hidden within *Gregson v. Gilbert* provides a different vantage point from which to see not only the story of the *Zong* and the Atlantic slave trade, but also the way European civilization, up until the present, is founded on a murderous secret.

In the author’s note that accompanies the poem, Philip writes that she was limited to “a language already contaminated, possibly irrevocably and fatally” (199). An early poem, “Zong #9,” demonstrates the problem by taking up the visual style of an account ledger, thereby reflecting the actuarial logic by which murder turns into profit. But, as Erin Fehskens writes, while the poem “play[s] with the form of exchange or equivalence,” “the content…refuses” (416, 419). Contained in the two irreconcilable columns of “Zong #9” is the legal rationale underlying *Gregson v. Gilbert* and the formal method by which Philip will disrupt it. It reads:

```
slaves
  to the order of
destroyed
  the circumstance in
fact
subject
creature
underwriter
negro
in want
in vessel
in provisions
die
become (17–18)
```

Sections of “Zong #9” speak directly to the legal arguments of the case (“to the order / in destroyed,” “the circumstance in / fact,” “the property in / subject,” “the loss in / underwriter,”
“the weight / in provisions”). Already with “weight,” we see how Philip will use *Gregson v. Gilbert* to produce her own history of the massacre. In “Zong #9,” “weight” is a measure, referring to how much water was onboard. But, in the decision, Mansfield uses “weight” to describe his preponderance of the evidence, specifically the fact that the massacre continued after the water stores were replenished. The “already contaminated” language also already has the potential to produce two different perspectives on the case. Other sections are less obviously connected to the case, speaking instead to larger questions about the massacre and the slave trade in general (“the sustenance / in want,” “the arrived / in vessel,” “the suffered in / die”). The rest of the poem begins to describe an ethical response to the case (“the subject in / creature,” “the fellow in / negro,” “the me in become”). The final couplet of the poem, in which “me” is separated from “become,” discloses the formal method of the other five sections. “Zong #9,” then, produces the legal rationale of *Gregson v. Gilbert* and demonstrates the potential disruptions already present in it.

But, as I shall argue, part of what *Zong!* ends up being about is the kind of disruption made possible by a lyric intervention into the historical record. The first version, proposed by “Zong #9,” is personal and ethical: Philip finding “the me” in *Gregson v. Gilbert* makes the project one of situating the present individual in the context of the past. Jenny Sharpe argues that the poem “is formed through a deep and personal connection with the drowned slaves,” “strong feelings of kinship” that allow Philip to access “the collective [memory]… formed through a transmission of stories and a way of being in the world indelibly marked by slavery and its legacy” (7, 5–6). She goes on to argue that Philip manifests her connection and kinship to the *Zong* massacre in her invention of Sataey Adamu Boateng, the “fictitious Ghanaian ur-ancestor,” who is credited as the co-author of *Zong!* (7). On Sharpe’s account, Boateng takes the place of
any of Philip’s ancestors who may or may not have been killed on the Zong; he is described on the back of the book as “the voice of the ancestors revealing the submerged stories of all who were on board the Zong,” a ghostly informant who provides Philip with the details of the voyage that have not been preserved in any official archive.  

I want to argue, however, that it is not Philip’s participation in the collective memory of New World Africans, but, rather, her choice of Gregson v. Gilbert that allows her to produce a counter-history of the Zong massacre. When Philip departs from the vocabulary of Gregson v. Gilbert and begins to use the letters, rather than the words, of the decision as the source material for the poem, the original constraint set by the word bank disappears. Gregson v. Gilbert includes all the letters of the alphabet, so Philip could have produced any number of works of art: Zong!, Baraka’s Slave Ship and the screenplays for Django Unchained and 12 Years a Slave are all hidden in Gregson v. Gilbert. Likewise, we can find material unrelated or opposed to Zong!—the complete Gossip Girl series or the screenplay for The Birth of a Nation—there as well. The raw materials for every text written in the roman alphabet are available there. So, there is, as it turns out, no formal constraint in the poem. There is, however, constraint on the level of content: Philip still uses Gregson v. Gilbert to produce a poem about the Zong massacre, not about slavery in general or any other subject. This is a different kind of poetic challenge than the one captured by finding “the me in become.” Where that was a hunt for a personal connection between the decision, the massacre, and the present, Zong! is after something different. Here, Philip presents one way in which the relationship between the non-English words and the language of Gregson v. Gilbert will work:

```
bodies for skim the sea for ius in
us in os in bone (87)
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The command to “skim the sea for / bodies,” which relates to Philip’s desire to bring back the bones of the dead for a proper memorial turns into the imperative that we “skim the sea for / … the law.” Finding the law at work in the case is, as we already saw, opposed to finding the bodies: the question of what insurance moneys would be owned to the ship’s owners would not be an issue if this were a murder case. But, as she goes on, the work of the poem will be to find “the law” in “iūs,” “us,” and “ōs.” Unlike “the me in become,” none of the letters of “law” can be found in iūs, us, and os. But iūs is, of course, Latin for law, duty, or right, where we get our word “justice.”21 Iūs is then transformed into “us,” then “ōs,” Latin for bone. The linguistic transformations that move from law to the bodies, implicating “us” in between, reveal the way that the constraint of the poem continues even after the limits of the word bank construction disappear. Gregson v. Gilbert will be transformed until it reveals how the law allowed the massacre.

3. It Was Only Trade

Philip presents the story of the massacre as a series of letters from a sailor to his fiancé Ruth. In them, he explains why he joined the voyage, the conditions on the ship, his feelings toward the captives, and his role in the massacre. As Sarah Dowling argues, Philip uses lyric conventions, primarily taken from “traditional elegies, such as the vocative ‘O’ or ‘oh,’ the preponderance of the first person ‘I,’ and the use of apostrophe to address an absent figure,” to grant the sailor agency in the poem (5). It is with this lyrically recognizable subject position that Philip reveals the conditions of possibility for the Atlantic slave trade.

Two segments of “Ratio” provide backstories for the sailors aboard the Zong.

…a short stint on a ship
a slave ship was the lad’s desire
just shy of seven teen there were for
tunes to lure a man from sane
The stories are very similar: these sailors are “one in ten thousand.” At a young age, they left home to seek “for / tunes,” their piece of “a seam / of gold so / broad & / so wide.” Both are disappointed. The first finds only “perils pus and bile.” The conclusion of the second vignette is less clear, but the description of the period as “age of lust” indicates that desire, and not its fulfillment, is central.

The sailor has his own desires, split between Ruth and a captive woman Sade, whom he calls Dido. In a letter to Ruth, he describes their life after he returns from the sea:

In true pastoral fashion, the sailor promises his lady love a life of natural abundance: they will have stags, boars, deer, carp, dog, fish, and grouse. But, in the final lines, it becomes clear that
the sailor is imagining an Eden worked by slaves: “he / negroes & she / negroes.” The dream, then, is to return to the pastoral leisure of Eden via slave labor. The sailor’s fantasy of his life with Ruth contrasts what he wants to give the other object of his lust, Sade. Not long after writing Ruth about their garden of Eden, he imagines the kinds of gifts he would give Sade:

sapphire ear
rings for you my
once my upon a time queen a lace
ruff too (112)

The wealth promised Sade is no pastoral garden; for the sailor’s “once… upon a time queen,” he promises the riches of the court. These two competing fantasies give the sailor economic motivation to comply with the order to massacre the captives. By highlighting the promises made to the sailors—the “for / tunes to lure a man from sane to / mad,” “the seam of gold so broad,” the pastoral wealth of plantation life, and the riches of court—Philip highlights the fact that these men were not motivated by hate, but by simple economics: for many, sailing was the best profession on offer. These sections not only distinguish Zong! from Slave Ship, Django, and 12 Years, they also reveal the material conditions that compelled the sailors.

While the sailors’ desire for wealth may explain how they came to be on board, it does not explain nor absolve them of their participation in the massacre. In the sailor’s letters to Ruth, he attempts to place that blame on larger social forces. First, he refuses to take any responsibility at all, describing the massacre as if it were the sea itself that killed the captives. But his denial fails to completely excise the human activity that set the massacre in motion. He writes:

…water carries a ship yet drown s
wine eats meat a man is not red yet turn s to
bone into sand (116)

The fragmentation in these lines produces two simultaneous readings that merge the ocean with “a man.” The subject of the first clause is clear: “water carries a ship yet drowns a man.” But the
rest of this section could apply to “water” or “a man.” The clause “is not red yet” just as plausibly describes the sea before the massacre as it does “a man,” red either from drunkenness or sunburn. The clause after it doesn’t dispel our confusion, either: “[T]urns to wine”—can modify the sea and the man: the wine-red sea, reminding us of Homer, or a man who “turns to wine” to ease his conscience. When we get to “eats meat on bone,” we might feel confident that “a man” has assumed the subject position. But even that isn’t entirely sure, as the sea—full of sharks that regularly followed slave ships—could be said to have “eat[en] meat on bone.” The uncertainty regarding the subject of the sentence disperses the action. While we know that what is being described is the massacre, it isn’t clear if it’s the man or the sea made red from it, whether the man is eating dinner or the sea is eating the captives. The speaker is refusing to claim the action as his own. While this section carefully evades the question of responsibility, the next section shifts the blame to the state. It reads:

\[
\text{were we u} \quad \text{sed dupes} \quad \text{all to king} \quad \text{& state to pope (116)}
\]

The speaker wonders if they “were used, dupes all to king & state.” Here, he shifts the blame to the powers that be, attempting to absolve himself of responsibility. We saw in *Gregson v. Gilbert* that some of the justices understood the insurance agency to be the victim of a dishonest shipping company. Here, the sailor tries to make the same move, aligning himself with the captives he drowned and occupying the position of victim. This is slyly captured in the fragmentation of the first line of the quote. As if speaking to the captives, he writes “were we u.” At the same time, it implicates the reader.

On the next page, the speaker reiterates his indictment of the ruling class, but cannot maintain his victimized role:

\[
\text{can you not} \quad \text{hear the plea s} \quad \text{we were deaf to}
\]
The sailor begs Ruth to hear “the [captives’] pleas” that he heard but did not abide. He attempts to justify his behavior—claiming that he is “god’s agent”—while questioning it, admitting that the justifications offered for the murders are “leaky” and don’t hold water. No longer shifting blame, the sailor recognizes his complicity with the structure and his inability to resist it.

This section, taken as a whole, masterfully presents the context from which the sailor emerges. Poor men were drawn to the sea to get their fortunes; in “an age of lust,” where seams of gold were rumored to be large enough for all, why wouldn’t a young man sign onto a slaver and seek his wealth? Once there, however, the sailor becomes caught up in forces more powerful than he can understand or resist: “king & state” not only allow, but more importantly authorize, massacres like the one that took place on the Zong. Philip presents the sailor in the context of a complex system of economic and social relations. It is only once the language of Gregson v. Gilbert disappears that this system becomes visible. He has little power—even realizing that he was a “dupe” does little to change his position in society; even realizing the claim that it was necessary to drown the captives is “a leaky tale” cannot take back the act of drowning.

Although the sailor isn’t presented entirely unsympathetically, Philip carefully aligns him with both the financial and legal system he tries to blame for the massacre. This first appears in his use of financial language and metaphor; it is as if the financial markets foundational to the slave trade have infected his language. For example, when describing the pastoral wealth he’s promised Ruth, he writes:

so we can li
This is from “Ferrum,” a later section of the poem where the fragmentation becomes more intense. It reads: “so we can live in ease, so you can live in great ease. Figs and oranges, hot buns, tea. A… lien to all.” Here, the “ease” the sailor promises Ruth depends on “a lien to all.” “Lien” functions both literally and figuratively. It literally refers to the systems of credit and debt that kept the Atlantic trade going, about which we will hear more shortly; it metaphorically refers to an ethical debt—what he refers to elsewhere as the “lien on [his] soul”—following his participation in the massacre (116).

Further, the sailor turns out to be canny observer of his trade. He realizes that they are “ma / king gain / from them” (here the line break that splits “making” into “ma” and “king” implicitly connects the state with finance), and he links the sale of the captives to achieving the wealth he’s promised Ruth, writing, “i want a / hat of / fur for you / ruth shine the / negroes for sale” (134, 86). But he also understands that to truly capture the “seam of gold,” he must have a different relationship to slave trading:

The desire to “invest… in slaves” proposes a different relationship between the sailor and the slave trade than the one he currently has. Rather than being compelled by the owners of the ship and captives to murder them, he will become one of the owners. That said, his desire to join the class of ship-owners and merchants is matched with his disillusionment about the trade, citing “the ruse in insure,” which relies on the same formal technique by which Philip found “the me in become” (80).
Finally, the sailor aligns himself with the very figures—the financial system, the king, and the pope—he has been using as cover for his involvement in the massacre. In the early pages of “Ventus,” the second section of the poem, one captive, Wale, speaks. His introduction is prefaced by the sailor again invoking the law as a justification of the massacre:

```
m lord
   says the law
   is never
wrong can
   sin the negro
   never
asks
write
   that i
   a
common negro he
   most
   un
hopes to re
   gain africa
   na
one day his
   me is wale...

   (88)
```

Just as we saw in the section from “Ratio,” here the sailor uses the law and his lowly position in society to justify his behavior. It is his “lord” who told him that “the law / is never / wrong.” This shifts the blame even further: he was just following the instructions of someone higher up than he. His reverie is interrupted by a “most uncommon negro” with hopes of returning home. The description of Wale deploys the trope of the exceptional black character that we saw at work in both contemporary films, a trope the sailors Philip presents are excluded from. As before, the fragmentation in the last four lines produces double-readings. The phrase “hopes to re / gain africa” certainly describes Wale, but the separation between “re” and “gain” produces “gain africa,” which applies to the work of the slave trade. Likewise, the line break in the middle of “name” allows us to read Wale’s introduction from both the perspective of the sailor (“his name is wale”) and from Wale’s perspective (“me is wale”). On the next page, the sailor reproduces Wale’s full request: “you / take / pen you / write / to / my sade” (89).
Sade, of course, is the object of the sailor’s lust. Just before Wale is introduced, we learn that sailor has fulfilled at least this desire: “a / queen / once now / my / whore to the crew / too” (88). As we discover later, the sailor “won” Sade in a card game: “an / ace / of spades the deuce / it was that / got me her forty days forty nights forty times” (107). Having now discovered that the woman he has raped is married to this “most uncommon negro,” the sailor decides to “play a ruse on / him.” The appearance of “ruse” immediately aligns the sailor with the insurance agencies. Thus, the sailor’s “ruse” begins to change his alignment in the poem. While he wanted Ruth to think of him as another victim, in this section, he becomes more closely aligned with the powers he blames.

The ruse the sailor plays on Wale is to make a play in which he marries Sade. The description of the set-up for the ruse requires the sailor take on the role of “captain / pope & / king,” further linking him with those he consistently attempts to blame for the massacre. The scene plays out, a perversion of the wedding scene:

\[
\text{do you take this negro to be your slave} \quad (90)
\]

In this sequence, the sailor plays two parts: on one hand, he must become “captain / pope & / king” to enact the ruse for Wale’s benefit; on the other, the fake marriage aligns him with the victim of his trick, Sade’s husband.

Philip’s choice of the sailor’s voice as the primary voice of the poem allows her to present the complex relationship between law and finance, between captive, sailor, and merchant, between the language of \textit{Gregson v. Gilbert} and the counter-language she makes visible. As we shall see in the next section, the counter-language made available in \textit{Zong!} allows us to see the history of the slave trade, and its historical and contemporary resonances, in new
light.

4. Dido’s Secret

At the heart of the Atlantic trade was the bill of exchange. As Ian Baucom explains in his masterful *Specters of the Atlantic*, bills of exchange produced for British merchants, insurance companies, and banks regular returns on their investments in the triangular trade between the U.K., Africa, and the New World (both Caribbean and U.S. ports). Upon a slave ship’s arrival at Caribbean and U.S. markets, the captives would be transferred to an agent who would sell them, through “auction, parcel, scramble, or other means…. [A]fter deducting his commission, [the agent would] ‘remit’ the proceeds of the sale in the form of interest-bearing bill of exchange” (60). The bill functioned as a promise that the agent would return the proceeds of the sale plus interest to the ship’s owner in a given amount of time, usually between one and three years.

Baucom explains the entailments of this arrangement:

> The Caribbean or American [sales agent] had thus not so much sold the slaves on behalf of their Liverpool “owners” as borrowed an amount equivalent to the sales proceeds from the Liverpool merchants and agreed to repay that amount with interest. The Liverpool businessmen invested in the trade had… transformed what looked like a simple trade in commodities to a trade in loans…. The slaves were thus treated not only as a type of commodity but as a type of interest-bearing money.²⁴ (61)

That is, the profits of the slave trade were the price the slaves brought at market as a commodity and the interest garnered through the bills of exchange: two different ways of making profit on human traffic. This, then, is why it wasn’t at all unusual, from the standpoint of the merchants, their insurers, and the British court, that Gregson sued Gilbert for thirty pounds per drowned captive: the lives represented by that figure were, for all intents and purposes, nothing more than a commodity that could bring not only their cost plus profit back to the merchant, but also whatever interest had accrued in the time between their sale at market and the remittance of the sales agent’s payment.
The gap between when a slave ship set sail and when the profits finally returned to the merchant produces a very strange temporality, which Philip presents in this poem, from early in the book:

underwriters of perils necessity & mortality of soon only & afterwards of was and not (54)

Philip presents the work of insurance—protection against “perils / necessity / & / mortality”—paratactically next to its strange temporality—“soon / only & / afterwards” and “of was and not.” “Soon” and “afterwards” describe the way that insurance contracts assigned a value to the captives before they were even on the boat. “[O]nly” serves two functions: on one hand, we might read it as placing a limit on the kind of value production these financial products are capable of: “only” “soon” and “afterwards.” On the other, it links the temporality of the insurance contract with risk of insurance: only in the case of “perils / necessity / & mortality” does the insurance contract come into play. It is in the case of these “perils” that we are compelled to speak of the captives with “was” and “not”: while the insurance contract is projective, looking at future value, its realization only happen once the object insured ceases to be.

As Baucom argues, this strange temporality is a “reversal of the protocols of value creation proper to commodity capital,” in which value is realized at the time of the sale. But bills
of exchange and insurance contracts allowed owners to claim the value of a commodity even if it never makes it to market. Baucom writes:

Such value exists not because a purchase has been made and goods exchanged but because two or more parties have agreed to believe in it. Exchange, here, does not create value, it retrospectively confirms it, offers belated evidence to what already exists…. The value [of the Zong] existed the moment the insurance contract was signed. (17)

And this brings us to a central point of both Zong! and Baucom’s Specters of the Atlantic: in important ways, the financial logic that founded the slave trade has again become central to the economy. The “reversal of the protocols of value creation” also describes the financial instruments central to the meltdown of the U.S. housing market in the run-up to the 2008 financial crisis. As Joshua Clover writes in “Retcon: Value and Temporality in Poetics,” “Credit… is a kind of time travel; it is a way of spending in the present the value of labor still in the future. Debt, equally, is the thing that knows what you will be doing next summer” (16).

These financial instruments assign present value to commodities that have not yet realized their value at market; in the case of both the Great Recession and the Zong case, the imagined values of these commodities become important precisely because the commodities will never make it to market. But Zong! is also interested in the ways that this logic extends back in time. She writes:

\[
\text{in did} \begin{array}{c}
\text{o afric} \\
\text{ome to her a s}
\end{array} \begin{array}{c}
\text{a grafts r} \\
\text{ecret so se}
\end{array}
\text{cret (149)}
\]

Put together, this highly fragmented section reads, “In Dido, Africa grafts Rome to her, a secret, so secret.” Dido, called Sade by her husband, is the captive woman the sailor rapes on board. But here, Philip connects her to Roman history, and specifically to Aeneas’s relationship with the Carthaginian queen Dido before his triumphant founding of Rome. At the minimum, the allusion
serves to connect the violence of the slave trade to the “secret” foundations of European culture: since before Rome was founded, Europe has been “grafted” to Africa.

But the appearance of Dido in Zong!, either intentionally or serendipitously, brings Peter Quint’s Epic and Empire and Frederic Jameson’s Valences of the Dialectic once again the surface of my argument. As we saw in the introduction, Jameson reads the inclusion of the Dido romance in the Aeneid as a temporal disruption that produces the identity between the historic winner (Aeneas as founder of Rome) and the historic loser (Aeneas as survivor of Troy). As such, Dido is the “vein of silver” that runs through “imperial gold,” revealing that she, a representative of the periphery, is in fact at the center of the Roman imperial project, both an obstacle to the new empire and a melancholy reminder of the lost one (Jameson 557).

When Dido reappears aboard the Zong, she is again at the center of an imperial project, this time belonging to Britain. But in “Notunda,” Philip projects her into the present, describing the “painful irony” that New World Africans, despite their emancipation from slavery, “continue to live, albeit in an entirely different way, either outside the law, or literally imprisoned within it” (206–207). As such, the figure of Dido proposes a historical continuity from the founding of Rome to present-day mass incarceration and state-sponsored violence in the U.S.

It is, of course, impossible to draw a straight line marking historical continuity between the destruction of Carthage in the third Punic War and the crisis of mass incarceration. To do so would be facile and elide the differences between Roman military imperialism, British mercantile imperialism, and American financial imperialism.25 But despite their differences, I will argue in these concluding pages that the position of black U.S. citizens as “either outside the law, or literally imprisoned within it” is essential to U.S. imperialism, just as Dido (as queen) was central to Roman imperialism and Dido (as slave) was central to British imperialism.
While Philip describes the relationship between New World Africans and the law as “entirely different” today than it was under slavery, I want to suggest that the legal framework is fundamentally identical. That is, the distinction made between citizens who have had contact with the U.S. justice system and those who have not has the same legal function as the distinction between slave and free. It’s tempting to read Philip’s critique of contemporary legal practices as a version of the argument presented in Michelle Alexander’s *New Jim Crow*. There, Alexander argues that mass incarceration is part of a long, historical project whose goal is “[d]eny[ing] African Americans citizenship” (1). She goes on,

> Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the ways that it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans. Once you’re labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination—employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service—are suddenly legal. (2)

There is nothing inaccurate about the treatment of felons in this country. What is inaccurate, however, is Alexander’s link between this form of legal discrimination and the form of legal discrimination under Jim Crow. Incarceration separates the American population into two categories: felons and non-felons. Although Alexander is correct to assert that more Americans of color, especially men of color, are categorized as felons than should be, she is incorrect to assert that this categorization is identical to the Jim Crow categories of “colored” and “white.” That is, Jim Crow worked by excluding people on the basis of genomic race; the prison complex, and the exclusion of those Americans who are subject to it, depends on separating people on the basis of their legal category. In this way, it more closely resembles the legal structures of slavery than it does the legal structures of Jim Crow.

Barbara Fields’s classic “Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States” critiques the belief that race-based exclusion was the foundation of slavery. She writes,
A widely used textbook of American history, written by very distinguished historians, summarizes the three-fifths clause of the United States Constitution (article 1, section 2) thus: “For both direct taxes and representation, five blacks were to be counted as equivalent to three whites.” The three-fifths clause does not distinguish between blacks and whites—not even, using more polite terms, between black and white people. (Indeed, the terms black and white—or, for that matter, Negro and Caucasian—do not appear anywhere in the Constitution, as is not surprising in a legal document in which slang of that kind would be hopelessly imprecise.) The three-fifths clause distinguishes between free Persons—who might be of European or African descent—and other Persons, a euphemism for slaves. (99)

That is, what distinguished a slave from a free person in antebellum America was not their race, but their legal position.26 This is not to say that the genomic difference between enslaved Europeans and enslaved Africans did not make a difference. It certainly benefited slave-owners to distinguish between “slave” and “free” by virtue of appearance: not only were they able to produce political support from poor whites, but they were also able to capture people of African heritage who, although legally free, looked more like the slave population than the free population. The point, then, is not that race didn’t matter; just that, on purely legal terms, the distinction was not race-based. Likewise, what appears today as a racist police force is the form of appearance of the legal distinction between felon and non-felon.

The legal distinction between felon and non-felon is not simply cover for personal or system-wide bigotry. Rather, as study after study reveals the high rate of unemployment among ex-convicts, especially released felons, it becomes apparent that this distinction is cover for a much different phenomena: the massive increase in U.S. unemployment. That is, prisons in the U.S. have become a technology by which unemployment is made to appear epiphenomenal (people are unemployed because they have been in prison) rather than as evidence of a crisis in the capitalist system (people are unemployed because of a crisis of capital).27 This, then, is the weight of Philip’s “entirely different” interpretation of contemporary legal structures: while slavery was a form of hyper-exploitation, mass incarceration is a form of exclusion.
The economic exclusion that mass incarceration creates is necessitated by a twin crisis in U.S. capitalism: the effects of the Great Recession and a system-wide crisis in the extraction of surplus value. The Great Recession has been productively read as evidence of the autumn of U.S. system, the end of the U.S.’s global economic dominance. In fact, part of Baucom’s argument in *Specters of the Atlantic* depends on showing how the financial instruments that made the Atlantic slave trade possible have returned to the center of the economy. Although *Specters* was published before the 2008 crash, that the crisis radiated out from the failure of insurance company is retroactive confirmation of Baucom’s argument. In this, Baucom relies on the cyclical economic history of Giovanni Arrighi, putting the crisis of capital in the U.S. in the context of other, prior cycles that mark the transition from one geographical hegemony to another. But there is good reason to believe that the Great Recession has another valence. Separate from the historical cycles Arrighi describes, the end of the twentieth century is marked by an increase in the organic composition of capital—that is, the replacement of human labor with machine labor in manufacturing. As Claus Peter Ortleib argues in “A Contradiction between Matter and Form” the rise of automation has significantly reduced the possibilities for the extraction of surplus value from labor. Because there are fewer manufacturing jobs globally, production costs for commodities have become less and less dependent on the cost of wages. A larger percentage of production costs now go to the purchase and maintenance of machinery (what Marx would call constant capital) than go to workers in the form of wages and benefits (what Marx would call variable capital). For Marxist economists, surplus value can only be directly produced by variable capital, so the increased investment in constant capital, while making costs more predictable and eliminating the possibility of spiking wages or work stoppages, also makes the extraction of surplus value more difficult. As such, the crisis that I’ve
been calling the Great Recession is best understood as both a cyclical crisis (as capital flees the U.S. during the autumn of its hegemony) and new stage of capitalism (marked by the difficult extraction of surplus value, which appears as high unemployment).²⁹

What we see at work in mass incarceration, then, is not a racist state apparatus. (Which is not to say that state apparatuses are not racist.) Rather, it is a form of appearance of a structural crisis. While I have argued that the legal bases of mass incarceration and slavery are identical, they are also part of distinct historical phenomena. Likewise, the appearance of Dido in Zong! at once reveals the identity between British and Roman imperialism, while preserving their differences. What the figure of Dido provides for both Zong! and its readers, then, is a figure who can condense the relationship between financial and legal systems dating back, under different valences, to the earliest moments of Western civilization. Her appearance in Zong! allows us to see the continuity of these systems. At the same time, she demands that readers account for the different relationships between the center and periphery across a vast expanse of history. Certain elements and figures recur—Dido, the African continent, the imperial extension of state borders and spheres of influence—while others are singular. In accounting for the differences between Roman, British, and American imperialism, we are forced to articulate the different ways that finance and law work together to promote a particular kind of economic system at the expense of non-white subjects.

Zong!, then, provides one way of understanding not only the legal and financial structures of the slave trade, but also a way of situating the slave trade in a longer historical continuity. Baraka’s Slave Ship proposed a different kind of historical continuity—that of black oppression at the hands of hateful white people—that has persisted, now sanitized and now unable to connect slavery to events in the present, in contemporary filmic representations of slavery. The
attention to racism effaces the economic motivations of those engaged in the slave trade. As such, they fail to produce a representation of the structures of slavery, opting instead for a critique of the content of slavery: the villainous slave-traders and slave-owners and the noble slaves and free persons who opposed it. Philip’s use of *Gregson v.* demonstrates what lyric intervention into archival records can produce: the visibility of previously hidden structures in society. What *Zong!* does, in making Dido’s secret public, is reveal that these structures, while persistent, are not permanent.
Notes to Chapter 3

1 As what might be read as foreshadowing of the end of *Slave Ship*, Baraka advises the white readers of his article on “Revolutionary Theatre,” that, if they want “TO SEE PEOPLE REALLY DANCING AND SINGING... GO UP TO HARLEM AND GET YOURSELF KILLED. THERE WILL BE DANCING AND SINGING, THEN, FOR REAL” (2).

2 This may have solved a technical problem for the first production of play. Based on the production notes contained in *Motion of History*, the collection that includes *Slave Ship*, all of the performers of the original production were black. The violent racism would be one way for the audience to differentiate between the characters on the basis of race that could not be visually represented.

3 Of course, the notion that slavery, Jim Crow, and resistance to Civil Rights programs (most notably busing) are attributable to racism was by no means a unique or innovative position in the late 1960s or today. As we shall see shortly, this is the explanation for slavery offered in two recent films. But Baraka’s presentation of racism as an attribute of all whites is a more radical version of the position.

4 For the sake of ease, I will refer to the film as McQueen’s. This ignores the fact that the script was adapted by John Ridley, who may have been responsible for many of the changes to the original material that I will detail below. That said, McQueen attempted to have his name added a co-writer for the screenplay—a request that was denied by both Ridley and Fox Searchlight—making attribution more complicated. Tarantino, who both wrote and directed *Django*, is an easier case.

5 Or, to use the terms already established, the films present slavery as a primarily technocratic, rather than structural, problem.

6 I will have more to say about the whipping scene shortly, but the hanging scene is perhaps a more radical departure from the memoir. The failed lynching in the memoir puts Northrup in considerably less danger than it does in the film. In the film, the noose is secured over the branch of the tree before the overseer intervenes. As a result, Northrup hangs, his toes barely touching the ground, for hours as plantation life continues behind him. In the memoir, the three would-be Lynchers never get Northrup to the tree; they are stopped while he is simply tied up. He is forced to stand in the hot sun, afraid to lie down because the ground would be hotter. No doubt, the experience was physically and psychologically damaging, but the threat of death is not as present in the memoir.

7 He is listed in the credits as “Robert,” linking him definitively to the character from the memoir. But that name is not given in the film.

8 Known as a “scold’s bridle,” these masks were originally worn by women as punishment. A bit placed in the mouth prevents the wearer from speaking. Some sources indicate they were also used to prevent captives from taking poison to commit suicide.

9 It isn’t entirely the case that *12 Years a Slave* ignores slave labor. Patsey is distinguished from the other slaves because she can pick five hundred pounds of cotton a day (in contrast, Northrup struggles to pick more than one hundred, and the one white day-laborer we meet can barely pick seventy). In one sequence in the fields, we see a slave faint and die because of the heat. However, because Northrup was a carpenter, he does not participate in fieldwork with the regularity of the other characters—we are more likely to see him siding a building or helping put up a roof than we are to see him picking in the fields. This creates distance between the main character and the primary form of slave labor, which was unskilled farm work. As we shall see shortly, the distance between Northrup and the other black characters is part and parcel of the film’s neoliberal ideology.

10 The relationship between Edwin Epps and his wife is even more developed in the Gordon Parks version of the film made for PBS in 1985. Patsey is replaced by Jenny, a woman Northrup met on the boat from D.C. to New Orleans and with whom he has a relationship on the Ford plantation. As in the memoir and McQueen’s version, she is the object of Epps’s unwanted attention. In the Parks version, however, it is clear that the whippings Epps gives her (and orders Northrup to give her) are at the behest of his wife; this is given even more weight in the Parks
version as his film implies that Epps married into money and is at risk of losing everything were his marriage to fall apart.

11 Epps’s irrationality is amplified by the costuming choices. In one scene, he wears only a nightshirt; the scene takes place mid-day, and Epps is surrounded by his fully clothed slaves. It draws attention to Epps, making him look ill-prepared and out of place. In two other scenes, he wears a wet piece of patterned cotton cloth as a kind of hat. No doubt, that’s an effective way of keeping cool. But, the effect is to set him apart from the other characters—especially the very put together Brad Pitt with whom he argues about slavery—drawing comic attention to his clothing choices.

12 Of course, Schultz is also responsible for souring the deal that would have freed Broomhilda without the need for a final bloodbath. If Django were by any other director than Tarantino, we might suspect there was some hidden political point being made when we put Schultz’s relationship with Django—responsible for his freedom and his near-death—next to his name (Dr. King Schultz).

13 He is presented much more ambivalently in the film. In the memoir, Northrup regrets not telling Ford that he is a free person, thinking that he may have helped him. In the film, Northrup does tell Ford, who says that he “can’t know that” and proceeds to sell him to the infinitely crueler Epps.

14 While the slaves at Candieland are ostensibly freed after Django murders all the white people, their end is not so happy. A major plot point in the film is obtaining Broomhilda’s freedom papers—that is why Django and Schultz buy her, rather than help her escape. No other slave in the film has their freedom papers, so, after the destruction of Candieland, they find themselves without a master, but still hundreds of miles from freedom in Mississippi. It is unreasonable to believe that any of them will make it out of the South.

15 This is a neat summary of a very complicated case. Collingwood was very ill on the voyage and died soon after the ship landed in Jamaica. For some period of time, he had handed command of the ship over to Robert Stubbs, the disgraced governor of Anomabu, a British fort in present-day Ghana, who was aboard as a passenger. Stubbs would be the only eyewitness to the events to testify at trial. A written statement by first mate James Kelsall was read, but he did not appear. As James Walvin notes, Stubbs was by no means a reliable narrator. By the time the trial took place, both Stubbs and Kelsall had good reason to distance themselves from the massacre, especially the question of who called for it. As such, it is impossible to know what the circumstances aboard the ship before, during, and after the massacre were.

16 Walvin provides more context for this claim, relying on notes taken by Granville Sharp, a prominent abolitionist, during the trial. Walvin writes, “The insurers’ counter-argument was straightforward: the Zong found itself in dire straits because of human errors, notably the navigational error which sent the ship well beyond Jamaica. Then, faced with the prospect of a slow return leg to their destination, it had been decided to kill the Africans to reduce pressure on dwindling water supplies. It was ‘a Blunder, and Mistake the Ignorance of those with whom the Ship was entrusted but it is not a Peril within the Policy.’ These details hid, they claimed, the real intention: ‘to saddle a bad Market upon the Underwriters instead of the owners.’ The insurers believed that Luke Collingwood was afraid that this, his first command, ‘would make a bad voyage for the Owners’. The insurers even claimed that, far from being ‘distressed’, the Zong arrived in Jamaica ‘in perfect safety and with her Crew And the Rest of the Slaves in good health’—an assertion that seemed to be belied by the reports in the Jamaica press of the Zong’s state upon arrival. The insurers felt they were not liable ‘either within the Words or meaning of the aforesaid policies of insurance’. The entire business was a murderous fraud” (144–45).

17 Philip visualizes the distinction between the ratio and the dicta in the poem “Os,” where she produces a list of 228 African names, placed as footnotes to the poem. See Erin Fehskens (especially pages 413–16) for an excellent reading of how this list of names relates to the trope of the catalog in epic poetry.

18 There are, of course, resonances between what Philip writes here and Theodor Adorno’s “The Lyric Poet and Society.”
19 We will see a different version of this in the next chapter, when we look at Susan Howe’s archival work in detail.

20 In “Notunda,” Philip describes being “startled” by a Ewe elder’s observation that “[n]one of [her] ancestors could have been among those thrown overboard… If that were the case, he continues, [she] would not be there.” (Philip’s daughter reminds her that this isn’t precisely true: any one of the murdered captives might have had a child or sibling on board.) Philip admits that, until that point, she had “never entertained the thought that [she] may have had a personal connection to the Zong” (202). Boateng, then provides the familial connection otherwise unavailable, and perhaps undesired.

21 Interestingly, this definition is left out of the glossary that accompanies the poem. Even if unintentional, its omission is still an effective way of reminding the audience of the separation between the law and justice.

22 The statement “no pigs” seems rather strange, but it might be the result of Renaissance structures of the pastoral genre. See Chapter Two, pages **–** for more on this.

23 The phrase “most uncommon negro” is a revision of Lord Mansfield’s response to Gregson v. Gilbert: “This is a very uncommon case” (211).

24 Philip also notes the way the captives are treated as money by highlighting the coincidence between the “guinea” coin (named for where the gold was mined) and the “guinea men” sold at slave markets: “how many guineas for this gui / nea man”? (138).

25 The slave trade was central to the economic arm of the British empire, allowing for the extraction of raw materials and slave labor from the periphery to ease the economic conditions of the working class at home and forestall class warfare. British imperialism, despite different modes of production, is, in this respect, distinct from Roman imperialism where the extraction of surplus value in the periphery was accomplished by territorial expansion. But, in both cases, wealth and labor from the periphery are used to appease the working class in the capital. The imperialism that the U.S. is often accused of is, first, not identical with either British or Roman imperialism. For an excellent explanation of the counters of U.S. imperialism, see Leo Panitch’s and Sam Gindin’s The Making of Global Capitalism. Of their many contributions to the conversation, perhaps the most helpful for our purposes is disassociating U.S. imperialism from the decline of U.S. hegemony. They write, “Although there has been a certain renewed fashionability of the term ‘empire’ to designate the United States, the imperial practices of the American state are usually presented as accompanied by economic decline and explained in terms of fending off challenges from rival states. The reality, however, is that it was the immense strength of US capitalism which made globalization possible, and what continued to make the American state distinctive was its vital roles in managing and superintending capitalism on a worldwide plane” (1). Further, they note that even in the late stages of the British empire, imperialism had transformed from the expansion of national borders and territories to “economic expansion and influence” (5). Although the U.S. did engage in territorial imperialism—Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and the Philippines, not the “manifest destiny” of our piece of the North American continent—the primary form of U.S. imperialism, especially in the twentieth century following the decline of British hegemony, has been the kind of economic imperialism or “informal” imperialism Panitch and Gindin describe.

26 This was necessitated by the fact that, in the early years of the North American colonies, there were of course white slaves. This practice fell out of favor, as it was much easier to control imported African captives, who by virtue of linguistic and cultural difference could not hope to contest their conditions. As Fields writes, unlike the European migrants who were enslaved, the “Africans and Afro-West Indians had not taken part in the long history of negotiation and contest in which the English lower classes had worked out the relationship between themselves and their superiors” (104).

27 See also James A. Manos’s contribution to Death and Other Penalties. Citing the work of Georg Rusche and Eugenii Kirchheimer, Manos argues that the modern prison system was developed in part as a technology to aid in the process of primitive accumulation, in which the bourgeoisie first forcibly separate the lower classes from the means of production by enclosing common lands and then discipline them into selling their labor on those expropriated lands. On Rusche’s and Kirchheimer’s account, then, prison is a disciplinary technology that produces
workers willing to work once—commonly held land for a wage; for those subjects unwilling to transition to wage labor, the prison yard separates them from “productive members of society.” Manos revises their argument by refusing to subordinate the logic of punishment to the logic of capital. Rather, he sees the convict-leasing programs that were developed after the Civil War in the South as a moment in which the logic of punishment “restructure[s] the modes of production” rather than being an “effect of the modes of production” (45). The distinction is subtle but important. In the account of the prison as a form of primitive accumulation, the argument goes that once the capitalist mode of production is in place, it must find a technology for producing wage laborers: the prison system is an example of such a technology. On Manos’s account, however, the prison system changes the mode of production: after the end of slavery, convict-leasing programs forced newly freed slaves, often convicted for being unemployed, back onto the plantation as part of their punishment. That is, the mode of punishment discovers a new source of surplus value for capitalism.

28 In Arrighi’s argument, the American cycle is the fourth: Genoese, Dutch, British, American. For a long time, the smart money was on China as the next center of global capitalism; the free-fall of their stock market this summer has challenged that argument.

29 My argument here is that mass incarceration, which makes the unemployment rates among black men appear as unrelated to economic conditions, masks the crisis in employment. This argument, then, is in line with the value dissociation theory of Roswitha Scholz, described in Chapter Two. There, I argued that capital designates one section of the population—women—as responsible for labor that is necessary to but not directly productive of surplus value in the form of unpaid reproductive labor. Here, the argument is that capital designates a different segment of the population—men of color—as superfluous to capital: they represent a release valve for rising rates of unemployment as a result not only of the cyclical movement of capital from the U.S. but also of the increased automation of production. At the same time, it is in direct conflict with the utopian theories of Chicago School of Economics, which promised an end to discrimination under capitalism. But this argument—that a desire for efficiency will trump a hatred for a particular kind of person—only works during boom times, when there are enough jobs to go around. As Chris Chen explains in “The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality,” at stake in our contemporary moment is “the management of those populations which have become redundant in relation to capital. Such populations are expendable but nonetheless trapped within the capital relation, because their existence is defined by a generalized commodity economy which does not recognize their capacity to labor.” They have become, in the words of Ernst Lohoff, “a monetary subject without money” (161). Prisons are a technology that excludes one segment from wage labor while keeping them enmeshed in a money economy. Their designation as “felon,” as opposed to “unemployed,” masks the crisis of employment from the rest of the population.
The Way We Mean Now:
On the Poetics of Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian, and Occupy Wall Street

*A Third Fiery Flying Roule*, posted online in November 2011, is an 8.5x11 inch broadsheet celebrating the human microphone, a technology developed at the Occupy Wall Street General Assemblies to replace illegal PA systems. The human mic (also called the people’s microphone or mic check) works by having the audience repeat a speech as it is being delivered so that those further back in the crowd can hear. The broadsheet takes a short lyric from Susan Howe as its epigraph:

“Here we are”—You can’t hear us without having to be us knowing everything we know—you know you can’t

Verbal echoes so many ghost poets I think of us as wild and fugitive—“Stop awhile” (*Souls* 58)

The lyric’s original context is a 2007 sequence called “Souls of the Labadie Tract” (from the collection of the same name). “Souls” presents Howe’s ongoing relationship to colonial American history in the form of a dialogue between her and the Labadists, a seventeenth century Quietist sect that settled in Maryland.¹ In the context of *A Third Fiery Flying Roule*, however, the poem functions as an uncanny description of the human microphone. Its opening play with the homophones “here” and “hear” announces both the presence of a plural speaker (“we”) and its manifestation: through the rolling repetition of the speaker’s words, a “we” is constituted out of the crowd. During Occupy’s General Assemblies, “here” and “hear” not only sounded the same: they meant the same. The human mic’s audibility, which guarantees the constitution of the plural speaker, creates a shared identity: “you can’t / hear us without having to be / us.” This, of course, is exactly how it works: members of the General Assembly can’t hear the speaker unless
other members, closer to the stage, repeat the speaker’s words. The crowd’s repetition transforms them into the speaker, so that they “can’t / hear” the speaker “without having to be” her. Finally, this shared identity brings shared knowledge with it: “You can’t / hear us without… / … knowing everything we // know.” Once the audience and speaker have merged, they share knowledge as well as identity. The kind of knowledge produced is not only derived from what the speaker says—the content of the speech—but the act of speaking itself, the experience of participating in the General Assembly. In the audience’s dual role as listener and speaker, they “kno[w…] everything” the speaker knows. Importantly, however, all of this relies on the participation of the audience. If the members of the audience closest to the speaker refuse to repeat her words, the rest of the audience cannot become part of the chain: they cannot hear the speaker, they cannot become the speaker, and they cannot “know everything” the speaker knows. As such, the human mic gives the audience power over what is shared and known at the General Assemblies, effectively distributing the speaker’s authority throughout the crowd.

The interpretation of the human mic as a producer of shared authority finds its aesthetic corollary in the Language writing group’s conception of the open text. Lyn Hejinian provides a definition in her 1983 talk “The Rejection of Closure” that corresponds to the practice and politics of the human microphone. First, “[t]he open text… is open to the world and particularly the reader.” This openness “invites participation,” so that it is subject to “subsequent compositions by readers” (Inquiry 43). That is, just as the shared texts of Occupy’s General Assemblies were composed through the audience’s participation, the open text is composed by its readers. And so it isn’t surprising that Adam Weg, whose “Letter from Chicago” is also featured in A Third Fiery Flying Roule, describes the human microphone in terms similar to
Hejinain’s definition of the open text: the human mic “inaugurates a community not of authorship but of readership.”

Further, this readerly participation, rather than being simply a matter of pragmatics (as it is for un-amplified speeches) or aesthetics (as it is when a text is subject to “subsequent compositions” by authorial readers), is also political. The open text, Hejinain writes, “rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies” (ibid.). That is, the open text, which understands itself and its meaning as always in the process of composition by its audience, also understands that process as fundamentally political.

In the almost four years since Occupy captured global attention, the human mic has become emblematic of the democratic principles and horizontal structure of the movement. The poetic projects of Susan Howe and Lyn Hejinian have been marshaled, both implicitly (in the formal identity between the human mic and the open text) and explicitly (in the case of Howe’s appearance on *A Third Fiery Flying Roule* and, as we shall see, in Hejinian’s writing on the movement) in support of Occupy. But Howe’s poetry, despite its long association with the Language writing group, is opposed to their aesthetic commitments and, by extension, Occupy’s political commitments. Howe understands the work of art as autonomous, separate from, unchanged by, and, in fact, indifferent to its audience. In this chapter, I will analyze how Hejinian’s and Howe’s projects diverge in two key areas—the relationship between form and content and the temporal relationship between the poem and the world. At the same time, I will demonstrate the continuity between Hejinian’s poetic practice and Occupy’s political practice. Through this analysis, I will show how the divergence between Howe and Hejinian reveals a gap in Occupy’s theory of revolution and its political practice. As we shall see, Howe’s
understanding of the relationship between past and present in the poem provides Occupy with a theory of temporality that might allow it to instantiate the revolutionary society it imagines.

3. How Does a Spoon Mean?

The preference for experience over interpretation depends on a feature of both Occupy and the open text that has, to my knowledge, so far gone uncommented upon: the identity of form and content. The initial appearance of this tendency is as the negation of content, which is perhaps nowhere more clear than in the slogan “Occupy Everything, Demand Nothing.” In her article about the UC-Berkeley protests of 2009, Lyn Hejinian explains that Occupy’s “demand for nothing negates… content, opting instead for situation—the fluid conditions requisite to a field of becoming” (“Captioning” 288).

On first sight, Hejinian’s conception of the open text seems to be opposed to the negation of content. There, she writes that the open text takes “primary chaos (the raw material, the unorganized impulse and information, the uncertainty, incompleteness, vastness)” and makes it “articulate without depriving it of its capacious vitality, its generative power” (Inquiry 47). In the open text, then, the form does not contain the content, but generates it. As such, Hejinian writes, “[f]orm is not a fixture but an activity,” in that it acts on the “raw material” of the poem so that it can become both “articulate” and “generative” (47). Initially, then, it appears as if form is in the service of content. But because the open text is subject to readers’ “subsequent compositions,” the form’s generation of new content is negated (43). Content becomes, in the open text, subordinated to form: what is put into the poem during “subsequent compositions” does not matter. As such, despite what seems to be an abundance of possible content, the form of the open text, like Occupy’s slogan, negates that content.

We see this in action in the anecdotes Hejinian supplies from the Berkeley actions.
Although these events predate Occupy Wall Street by two years, Hejinian understands them to participate in the same political practice. Here, we see how form both generates and negates content:


And then someone rings a change on it: “More time! More life!”
The volume increases. “More time! More life!” (291)

We can immediately see this moment’s poetic appeal. “Rice” is slant rhymed with “life,” creating a chant that demands our basic necessities be met. But rice is dropped in favor of another slant rhyme, “time,” and the offer of lunch turns into a demand for immortality. The slogan’s quick change is enabled by rhyme, a fact emphasized in Hejinian’s naming conventions—“Rennie Ben” and “Jillie Jane”—all of which play with poetic patterns of repetition. But the changeability of the slogans requires a commitment to the form of the slogan, rather than its content: “more rice” is the same, formally, as “more life,” which is the same as “more time.” Of course, we can imagine the chant “more time” having political content at a certain kind of protest: a slowdown strike might take “more time” as its slogan to resist the ever-increasing demands of the production line. But here “more time” is not meant as a correction of or rebuke to any particular policy or program, rather, it “rings a change” on the form established by “more rice.”

The negation of content allows participants and theorists to connect the Occupy movement with a variety of other contemporary and historical revolutionary moments. The New York camp was associated with Arab Spring, the occupation of the Wisconsin state capital, and the London Riots (all the same year); Marina Sitrin further explains that “[o]ur movements are not without precedent,” citing the Zapatistas, the Direct Action Network (of the 1999 Seattle WTO protests), and the horizontalidad formation developed in response to the collapse of the
Argentine economy in 2001 as forebears to Occupy Wall Street (Occupy! 9–10). Although the content of each protest is radically different, their form is identical.

Further, the negation of content allows Hejinian to connect the Occupy form with other areas of human activity and experience. She locates the political potential of Occupy in its ability to “bridge” “divisions between creative work, political activism, and everyday life” (“Captioning” 281). The divisions between the spheres of activity are broken down, because, on her account, they share an ontology. This is found, on the aesthetic register, in Gertrude Stein’s Stanzas in Meditation, which Stein described as “her real achievement of the commonplace” (Inquiry 362). On Hejinian’s account, the poem is dedicated to the commonplace, everyday, and quotidian because it was “in the household sphere, in the domicile… that freedom was possible” (367). The meaning of the poem and the commonplace objects it includes “is inherent to [them]—identical with [them]. When it comes to ordinary things, their meaning is the same as what they are. The meaning of an ordinary spoon is the ordinary spoon” (364). This is also how she describes the occupation of Wheeler Hall during the 2009 protests: it “was itself a fulfillment of demands—for a community-based, cooperative, multi-functioning learning/living space in which diverse learning-supportive activities could coexist” (288). The form of the protest therefore fulfills its content because it is identical with it. Likewise, W. J. T. Mitchell, in his contribution to Occupy: Three Inquiries in Disobedience, explains that the form of occupation “is a demand in its own right, a demand for presence” (102).

This identity of form and content entails a particular temporality. With regard to the commonplace objects that populate Stanzas in Meditation, Hejinian argues that because they make up our present experience, they exist “independent of the cause-and-effect relations that create and propel plot” (358). As she explains:
The present consists of the sensible world; indeed, the only sensible world available to us is the present one, and it is a world of sensory effects... [I]nsofar as sensory effects and the sensing of them exists only presently, they are causeless—and thus one could say they are unexplained and, perhaps, inexplicable. (358)

The reason that the present is inexplicable—which would mean that Stein’s *Stanzas* are and the spoon is—is because they are outside of narrative structure.

It is not at all surprising that Hejinian posits *Stanzas in Meditation* as “independent of the cause-and-effect relations that create and propel plot.” While Hejinian’s theory of spoons is a fragile metaphysics, lyric’s non- or anti-narrativity is, of course, a long-standing generic marker. What is surprising, however, is that Occupy shares its temporality with the perpetual present of the lyric poem. As Mitchell argues, the form of Occupy turned out to be designed specifically to guarantee the longevity of the movement. He writes, “[t]he refusal of Occupy to designate leaders or representative spokespersons, its insistence on anonymity and equality, and its reluctance to issue a specific set of demands or policy recommendations was an effort to prolong” it (xi). Put differently, were Occupy to issue a set of demands, they would produce the conditions by which the encampment would end. If this were to happen, the content of the protest would outlast its form, rendering the two un-identical. As such, the identity between form and content that marks the Occupy formation requires a purely presentist temporality.

An anecdote from the camp will help make this clear. Slavoj Žižek visited the General Assembly on October 9th, 2011. While praising the occupation, he warned, “Don’t fall in love with yourselves. We have a nice time here. But remember, carnivals come cheap. What matters is the day after, when we will have to return to normal lives” (*Occupy!* 68). His attempt to imagine how Occupy might be understood after it ended was met with derision. Quoting the same speech, Mitchell responds:
I remember hearing this same homily preached in the Sixties. I thought it was a mistake then and still do. I want to insist on the need for exuberance, creativity, and pleasure in the revolutionary process. Emma Goldman captured the point perfectly when she declared that she did not want to be part of any revolution that banned dancing. (113)

The reason Mitchell cannot agree with Žižek is not because the two fundamentally disagree about the need for “exuberance, creativity, and pleasure.” It is because they fundamentally disagree about the temporality of revolution. For Mitchell, the revolution persists, unchanged, from the revolutionary moment into the future: the form of the revolution is identical with the form of society post-revolution. A ban on dancing during the revolution, for Mitchell, implies a ban on dancing after the revolution. For Žižek, the revolutionary moment is transformative: it is a rupture that separates one form of life from another. His allusion to the Bakhtinian carnival, in which the order of social relations is reversed for just one night, underlines Occupy’s presentism. Mitchell understands Žižek’s critique as a critique of the nature of the event, of its “exuberance, creativity, and pleasure.” But, the critique is not of the experience of the camp, but its temporal relationship to history.

Mitchell points to the temporality of the movement in his preface to Three Inquiries:

Indeed, the very notion of “the event” comes under scrutiny in these pages, which explore other ways of conceptualizing revolutionary processes. Would it be better, for instance, to think of this as a revolutionary moment, with all the associated ambiguities of the merely “momentary” and ephemeral alongside the sense of the momentous turning point, the “moment of force” that torques historical events and makes tiny occurrences (a fruit vendor’s self-immolation in Tunisia, for example) into a global incident and catalyst for revolution? (ix)

The self-immolation to which Mitchell refers was Mohammed Bouazizi’s protest against his treatment by the Tunisian government in December of 2010, widely considered to be the event that launched the Arab Spring. While we can now reconstruct the chain of events that led to Bouazizi’s decision and how that decision reverberated in Tunisia, the Middle East, and globally, from Bouazizi’s standpoint—the standpoint of a present—there was no way to tell that his
protest would have the effect it did. That is, the two temporalities Mitchell asks us “to think…alongside,” the “momentary” and the “momentous,” are impossible to distinguish until they are in the past. The transformation of an event from “momentary” to “momentous” can only be understood in retrospect, and Occupy’s commitment to the present entails that it will never be able to identify itself or any other event as “momentous”: in the radical present required by Occupy’s political formation, we can only ever be momentary, because it refuses to project the movement into the future.

In his contribution to Three Inquiries, Michael Taussig expands on this temporality:

[S]everal older women sit sedate in lounge chairs knitting woolies for OWS and the coming winter. They have all the time in the world, for they inhabit time and time stands still. They don’t need to reference history or the matriline. They are all that with what Benjamin called “the time of the now,” that compressed stasis which is the revolutionary moment. Clickety-clack go the knitting needles as history is rewoven. They have cardboard signs by their sides, voicing their outrage. Clickety-clack. This is not the clickety-clack of the locomotive of history which Marx invokes in his preface to The Introduction to The Critique of Political Economy. This is not the clickety-clack of Benjamin in his anarchist (Blanqui) mode, trying to figure out when to pull the emergency brake that will usher in the revolution. Nor is it the explosion that Benjamin invokes as the blasting apart of the continuum of history that creates the jetztzeit, the “time filled with the presence of now.” Revolution is different now. (31–32)

We might forgive Taussig’s sudden insight into how these women think (or, on his account, don’t think) about “history or the matriline,” attributing it to the speed at which these essays were written, their desire to produce the “second draft of history,” as Mitchell calls it, before the national interest in Occupy waned (vii).8 We might also forgive the slip in logic in which the people “knitting woolies for… the coming winter” are the same people for whom “time stands still,” even though the very act of preparing for winter reveals, at the very least, a practical understanding of the way time does tend to march on. What is most important for our purposes is the notion that these women are Taussig’s symbol for the temporality the movement. It points to a desire to prolong the momentary, rather than to allow “the continuum of history” to be put back
together following a momentous break with the past. Occupy, as it came to understand itself, was not a revolution that would lead to a better world; it already was, itself, a better world: carnival forever.⁹

The open text and the Occupy political formation, therefore, share not only a strong preference for form over content—so that content becomes irrelevant—but also a presentist temporality that enables the disappearance of form. As such, their theory of revolution is distinct from past theories of revolution: the protest, enacted in the present, is designed to be the form of society moving forward.

2. Inexorable Order

Readers familiar with Howe’s work, especially the pieces explicitly engaged with archival materials, will already sense the direction of what follows. Briefly setting aside Howe’s interest in history and the temporality such an interest produces, I want to begin by reading Howe’s theory of form and content. Howe never speaks directly to the question of form and content in her poems, but we can derive a theory of it by reading “Personal Narrative,” the poem that opens Souls of the Labadie Tract, next to the visual prosody in her poems. There, she describes her relationship to the archival materials that make up much of the found text in her poetry.¹⁰ She writes that the experience of browsing through Yale’s Sterling Library in the 1970s “had a life-giving effect on the process of [her] writing” (14, emphasis in original). She writes that the Sterling Library produced “the spiritual and solitary freedom of an inexorable order only chance creates” (ibid.). The relationship between chance and order in her composition process, I argue, is where we can most clearly see the distinction between Howe’s and Hejinian’s projects.

Howe goes on, “roving through centuries, apart from call number coincidence, there is no inherent reason a particular scant relic and curiosity should be in position to be accidentally
grasped by a quick-eyed reader” (15). The relationship between order and chance begins to clarify itself. The order Howe refers to here is, of course, the order imposed on books by library classification systems. While the Library of Congress Classification system means that she can only find a limited set of books placed together, there is nothing necessary about their placement: there is “no inherent reason” that books on Christian denominations are found in the section labeled BX and books on New England history are found in the section labeled F1 – F105. Once, however, such an order is put in place, the classification of a book in the BX section and another in the F section becomes the only way those books can be ordered: “chance creates” “an inexorable order.” Chance plays a further role here, because, as the verb “roving” indicates, Howe’s discovery of certain historical texts is not systematic. She explains:

A number of shelved volumes which are tougher have so compressed their congested neighbors that these thinner often spineless pamphlets and serial publications have come to resemble smaller extremities of smallest twigs… Often a damaged edition’s semi-decay is the soil in which I thrive. (ibid.)

Howe finds herself drawn to certain kinds of books, “damaged” texts in a state of “semi-decay.” There is “no inherent reason” these texts should have been placed next to “tougher” volumes that have, over the years, compressed them: it is a matter of not only the adoption of a particular classification system, but also a matter of what books are in the library’s collection to begin with and what books might be checked out at any given moment. Further, there is “no inherent reason” Howe prefers them to their bulkier neighbors. Or, rather, the reason that Howe prefers these books to the others is a matter of chance; a different poet may be attracted only to larger volumes or to volumes on the highest or the lowest shelves. But this chance turns into order itself, as the “scant relic[s] and curiosit[ies]” Howe has come across are put into formal order in her poetry.
But what order? Readers familiar with her work will likely envision the two forms Howe most often relies on in her poetry: the word square and the collage. Both are visualizations of her understanding of the uneven recording of history (about which I shall have more to say below). The word square, of which “Souls of the Labadie Tract” is an example, is composed of short sections, typically symmetrical both horizontally and vertically, centered on the page and surrounded, almost overwhelmed, by negative space. The beginnings and endings of the lines are fragmented: one line might begin with the second half of a word, or the connective tissue between two lines might be lost, as if it were covered over by the margins of the page. As Craig Douglas Dworkin explains, “the visual layout of centered columns of equally lengthened lines moving paratactically in fragmented units creates the appearance of larger, originally coherent texts read through a narrow window” (399). Howe reproduces the experience of reading an incomplete historical record in the word square; it is simultaneously the prosodic equivalent of her use of “damaged editions’ semi-decay” as the ground for her poems. The collage poem, in contrast, captures the slow erasure of voices from the historical record before they are completely lost. In a 1995 interview with Lynn Keller, Howe describes her intentions for the collage work in “The Nonconformist’s Memorial,” which deals with Mary Magdalene’s appearance and disappearance in scripture. She explains, “I was trying to illustrate the process of her interruption and erasure” (11). The collage poems, which render the text almost illegible, represent the production of the historical record before it is complete; we can see the voices of “survivors” begin to crowd out “other voices” (Birth-Mark 47).

In his reading of Souls of the Labadie Tract, Krzysztof Ziarek argues that Howe’s poetic practice reshapes the form of language so that it can represent voices lost by history. The project is not so simple as bringing these figures to light; instead, Ziarek argues, Howe represents them
in their un-representability, makes them speak their silence. She does so by “evolving a way of writing, and a way of thinking, that, contrary to the operations of power and its emphatic proclamations, would remain attentive to the underside of words and the power of meaning” (251). In Ziarek’s reading, as well as mine, the form and content of Howe’s poetry are inseparable. The form of the poem—whether word square or collage—is fundamentally related to the content, in that Howe’s understanding of how the content has been changed by the historical record determines its form in her poetry. We are given access to the Labadists in the word square, a visual style that implies that we are not getting the whole story; in other cases, like “The Nonconformist’s Memorial” or, as we shall see shortly, “Frolic Architecture,” the form underlines the way the subject of the poem has been almost entirely erased by historiographic practices.

Further, as her writing about the library indicates, Howe believes that the content’s appearance in the poem retroactively makes it necessary to the poem. “Souls of the Labadie Tract” would be a different piece entirely if Howe had been interested in any one of a number of short-lived religious communities in American history. Because of the Labadists’ importance to the text, they become necessary to it. To give a more famous example: there’s no reason that William Wordsworth’s young friend Lucy had to die. But once she has died, and once “She dwelt among untrodden ways” is written, her death becomes necessary within the poem.

Hejinian, in contrast, understands the construction of the poem as an ongoing process, which requires that she privilege the form of the poem over the content produced by the author. As such, no element of the poem’s content can be understood as necessary. One way to understand this distinction would be to say that for Howe, the form articulates the content, while for Hejinian, the form generates the content.
There is another important distinction between Howe’s and Hejinian’s practices as they relate to the form and content. While Hejinian’s open text “rejects the authority of the writer,” Howe’s formal practices insist on her authority over the text. To demonstrate this, I want to turn to “Frolic Architecture,” from the 2010 collection That This. The poem is composed of lines and fragments pulled from Hannah Wetmore Edwards’s private writings. Unlike a word bank poem, such as Zong!, in which the poet collects all the words that appear in the found text and reorders them into a new piece, Howe photocopies fragments of the text and uses those to create the poem. As such, she commits herself to using not only the same words Wetmore used, but many of the same phrases. Howe manipulates these fragments by overlapping them, rendering large sections of the text illegible. In “The Disappearance Approach,” the essay that opens That This, Howe explains, “the ‘invisible’ scotch tape I recently used when composing ‘Frolic Architecture’ leaves traces on paper when I run each original sheet through the Canon copier” (31). The “traces” left by the scotch tape are not intentional: she did not initially mean for the dark lines that divide the fragments to be reproduced. As such, even though they are visibly present in the poem, we are not intended to “read” them in the same way we read the words on the page. While we might understand these traces as a technical problem that ought to be ignored in the same way that we might ignore the wires holding up a flying actor, Howe draws our attention to them. Not only does she reference them in an earlier poem, but if she were bothered by their presence or did not think they should be visible, the technology to erase them certainly exists. Even though the lines are accidental, Howe chose to keep them and provides an oblique justification for their retention: “[l]yric is transparent—as hard to see as black or glare ice” (24). The tape marks are evidence of the cause of the poem, a trace of Howe: she may not have created the fragments she uses, but she has created the patterns by which they interact, overlap, and obscure
each other. This formal element of the poem serves as a visual reminder of the author as the organizing principle of the poem.

Through the collage work of “Frolic Architecture,” Howe produces her most overt claim to authority over the interpretation of her work. One of the most complete lines from Wetmore’s journal reads “is not for the clay to say to the potter why have you made” (That This 92). We can fill in the rest of the line easily—it is not for the clay (the material) to say to the potter (the artist), why have you made the pot (the final product). In the context of Wetmore’s journal, it is likely meant to be a metaphor for humanity’s relationship to God. But, when read in the limited context of “Frolic Architecture,” we must read it as a programmatic statement describing Howe’s position as the organizing principle of the poem. She has taken the journal entries and made them into something new and, importantly, distinct form their original form. The material—the clay or Wetmore’s journal—has no hold over the final product—the pot or “Frolic Architecture.” As such, the fragment functions as a strong statement of one of the guiding principles of Howe’s poetics: the materials she uses in the composition of her poetry cannot offer an explanation of the poems. Initially, this appears as a refusal of definitive interpretation—the words that make up the poem cannot say why the poet has made it—and an insistence on the openness of poetic language. But, the point isn’t that the clay can’t explain why the potter made the pot; the point is that the potter could. The line directs us to Howe, the potter—that is, the author—as the source of the definitive interpretation.

Another section of the poem is composed by overlapping fragments from the same journal entry next to each other, but out of order. For example, the first line reads “ter I had take/d (after I had taken many res-” (That This 53). (Here, I use a “/” to indicate the break between the two halves of the line, and “//” to indicate the line break.) The first half of the line is
a fragment of the second half, which then provides readers with the limited context around “ter I had take.” Howe encourages readers to use the second half of the line to fill in the first. But, this method changes at the fifth line, which reads “sensible, I tho/le and negligent, notwithstand-.” Because of the reading conventions Howe established at the beginning of the poem, we read the half-lines as closely connected, despite the now obvious fact that they are not from the same sentence and may not even be from the same piece of writing. The final lines exploit the convention, creating a new assemblage from disconnected pieces that we cannot help but read as if Wetmore had intended them to be placed together: “had seen it wht/abruptly and so strong that it // I attempted tod/n to look upon it as supernat- // by a piece of st/ower of imagination, and that” (53). Howe’s rearrangement of these fragments gives readers the sense that Wetmore is describing a “piece of st” that she felt initially was “supernat-[ural],” but “attempted to” see another way, attributing the effect to the “[p]ower of imagination.” This section then works against the religious metaphor of the poem’s relationship to the poet we saw above. There is nothing supernatural; it is only the power of our imagination that makes it seem so. A later fragment confirms this reading: “soon carried my ideas much into / o be very ravished with it & sometimes[...] felt a wave in the air, held there by the / omething delirious & sometimes soft yet I w / gree Rational” (57). Despite the radical fragmentation of these lines, we can make some sense of them: what “carried” Wetmore’s ideas to delirium, was, on further consultation, determined “Rational.” Just as above, what initially appears as supernatural or superhuman is then brought back into human control. A fragment late in the poem seems to clarify—as much as is possible at this point—the meaning Howe is wringing out of Wetmore. It reads: “Glorious—what do we / surprisingly Beautiful—and / made manifest and the” (78). Again, Howe emphasizes the tension between the idea of something divine or supernatural contained in
“glorious,” and something material contained in “manifest.” The use of “beautiful”—a category of aesthetics—seems to link the divine and the material.

While Howe’s poems appear to be constructed by chance or something supernatural, they are, in fact, constructed by the author: it is she that makes “manifest” the meaning of the poem. Such a commitment goes against the principles of the open text. That is, Howe’s poetic practice depends upon the idea of an organizing principle or author who reconfigures and repurposes items found by chance into an “inexorable order.” Or, to put it in Lyn Hejinian’s terms: Howe produces decidedly closed texts.

Within this transformation of chance into order, Howe produces a theory of history at odds with the presentism of the Occupy formation and its associated poetics. As I argued above, Howe’s formal practice depends on turning her random encounters with archival objects into poetic order. In her work that makes explicitly historical interventions, this same transformation of chance into order appears as the construction of history. I want to turn first to “Melville’s Marginalia,” a much earlier poem than the others I will be using here. The reason for including this poem is because it elaborates on the descriptions of Howe’s practices that we saw in “Personal Narrative.”

At its basis, “Melville’s Marginalia” is a literary historical intervention. The claim of the essay section (which makes up, in two sections, nine of the piece’s sixty-one pages) is that James Clarence Mangan, an Irish poet, is the model for Melville’s Bartleby. The poem begins with a description of its causes:

One day while searching through Melville criticism at the Temple University Library I noticed two maroon dictionary-size volumes, lying haphazardly, out of reach, almost out of sight on the topmost shelf. That’s how I found Melville’s Marginalia or Melville’s Marginalia found me. (Nonconformists 89)
The lucky discovery of the two texts started her composition process: “pulling a phrase, sometimes just a word or a name, at random… and letting that lead…by free association to each separate poem in the series” (105). So far, the writing process is chance-based: the books were discovered by accident; the raw materials of the poem were pulled “at random” from the source material. Howe immediately calls the randomness of “Melville’s Marginalia” into question, writing “[f]ree association isn’t free” (105). Despite the unplanned discovery of the text and her free play with the material, Howe believes something is constraining her thought. As we saw already, however, Howe rejects supernatural explanations for the production of poetry: while it may be fate or chance that led her around the library, what ultimately matters is what she does with the material there found.

Having finished reading Melville’s Marginalia, which Howe describes as the “loving” work of “a dedicated sub-sub-graduate student in a time before librarians, scholars, and authors relied on computers or Xerox machines,” Howe turns to Houghton Library at Harvard to examine some of Melville’s books (90, 91). While reading his copy of Poems by James Clarence Mangan: she “saw the penciled trace of Herman Melville’s passage through John Mitchel’s introduction and knew by shock of poetry telepathy that the real James Clarence Mangan is the progenitor of fictional Bartleby” (106).

Of course, “the penciled trace” isn’t her only evidence. Mangan worked as a scrivener and died “probably from starvation” in 1849 (107). The similarity between Mangan and Bartleby is indeed striking. But, as Howe herself notes, “[t]he problem was chronology” (106). “Bartleby” was composed in 1853; Melville’s own inscription in the copy of Mangan’s poems, however, indicates that he did not discover the poet until 1862. She attempts to substantiate her claim—to turn what appears to be a fascinating set of coincidences into a causal, literary-historical account.
of the composition of “Bartleby”—by pointing to the fact that “Mangan already had American readers during the 1850s,” so many so that the *United States Magazine and Literary Review* published an issue devoted to Mangan in 1851, two years before “Bartleby” (107). These facts lead her to conclude, with uncharacteristic certainty, that “[b]y the time Melville acquired Mitchel’s edition of Mangan’s poems in 1862, he was already familiar with the poet’s life and work” (107).

Whether or not we are convinced by Howe’s claims is, in fact, beside the point. What is important about “Melville’s Marginalia” is that, despite the “problem… [of] chronology,” the resonances between Mangan and Bartleby are so great that it would be hard to imagine coming across the facts of the case and not devising the account that Howe has. Although everything leading up to the composition of “Melville’s Marginalia” was random or coincidental—from the fact that she was herself familiar with Mangan because of her Irish mother, to the discovery of *Melville’s Marginalia*, to which of Melville’s books were preserved at Harvard, to the fact that Melville owned a book of poetry written by a man who was employed as a scrivener and starved to death in a hospital—the case requires that some account be produced. The chance events that Howe emphasizes throughout the poem are ultimately transformed into necessity: we must produce an explanation.

The necessity of producing a logical account of events (what some might call history) is more forcefully articulated in “Arisbe,” which appears in *Pierce-Arrow*. The poem at first seems to be trying to uncover the identity of C. S. Peirce’s second (or possibly third) wife, Juliette, by reviewing all of the claims in Peirce biographies regarding her origins: a disgraced German noblewoman, an exiled prostitute, the illegitimate half-gypsy daughter of a French diplomat. But, having traced the Peirces’ lives up to the point when, following his exile from academia, they
purchase Arisbe, a farm near Milford, Pennsylvania, the biographical inquiry ceases. Howe, in fact, never settles on an explanation for either of the mysteries surrounding Peirce’s life. While she raises a number of possibilities for Juliette’s biography, she never declares one as more or less correct than the others. Likewise, she explains that Peirce’s dismissal from Hopkins and subsequent unemployment were the result of “slanders and rumors” that denounced Peirce as “a decadent aesthete, a lecher, a liar, a libertine, queer, a wife beater, an alcoholic, a drug addict, a plagiarist, a wannabe robber baron,” but never provides an account of the true story (Pierce-Arrow 8). What the poem quickly becomes concerned with is the estate itself: “Max Fisch says the Peirces probably called their property ‘Arisbe’ after a city in Troas, the ancient colony of Miletus, the home of the early Greek philosophers… I think Peirce named the house for Homer’s ‘brilliant’ or ‘shining’ Arisbe” (15). Arisbe is mentioned just three times in the Iliad. It is the city where Lykaon, an illegitimate son of Hector, lives before he joins the Trojan army. Fisch’s claim at first makes more sense: the original intention when purchasing Arisbe was to turn it into a free scientific and philosophical academy, so naming it after a town historically associated with philosophy is certainly plausible. So, why does Howe think Peirce named it for a rather insignificant location associated with a minor character in the Iliad?

The answer is found in her use of Alexander Pope as a foil to the Peirces. He is linked to Arisbe because of his translation of Homer (which Howe quotes) and his lavish estate, Twickenham. Howe compares Arisbe unfavorably with Twickenham: “There is no artificial grotto with an aquatic effect… no busts of Homer and Virgil to stimulate a visitor’s thought. The picturesque in its late American stage is awkward and cut up. Something is wrong with the scale. Where are the visitors?” (17). Scale is essential to “picturesque,” an early nineteenth century architectural and landscaping style that was designed to simulate the experience of scenic
touring; the idea was to create a new landscape that would look and feel exactly like an old, abandoned one. For it to be properly appreciated, you needed enough land for visitors to be able to see the picture in the right way. While Twickenham seems to have succeeded, Arisbe doesn’t, both because it is “awkward and cut up” and because the “visitors” never come. Arisbe’s aesthetic failure, we soon find out, is a direct result of Peirce’s academic failure.

The reference to the visitors brings us back to the economic problem the Peirces faced. “The free school never materializes” so that “the material the unreal real thing that is in money enters into language by determining it” (17). Here, Howe sketches the connection between money and language that ends up being the difference between Twickenham and Arisbe. She explains that Pope’s translation of Homer was conceived out of “economic necessity” (15). Because his family was Roman Catholic, they could neither own property nor invest their money. The translation, which was offered on subscription, provided them enough money to lease Twickenham. Here, “money enters language” because it is Pope’s motivation to start the translation that “established his reputation” (15). In contrast, the failed business transactions that Charles and Juliette Peirce took on “[f]orced [Peirce] to earn their support on what he could gain by various temporary means. […] [H]e produced an extraordinary number and variety of book reviews and essays (often anonymously)” (17–18). Like Pope, economic necessity pushes Peirce to write, but his products do not secure his legacy as a philosopher; instead the reviews and essays he writes, because they are anonymous, have absolutely no effect on his (already badly damaged) reputation.

“[T]he material the unreal real thing that is in money” forced both Pope and Peirce to write; their success or failure is externalized in their homes. Pope was successful and “received a constant stream of brilliant visitors”; Peirce was not, so he is left to wonder, “where are the
visitors?" Arisbe makes visible the catastrophe of Peirce’s career, while Twickenham makes visible the success of Pope’s. But, the difference between them, as “money enters into language by determining it” indicates, is not on the register of language: it’s on the register of money. Put simply, Pope was better at making money than Peirce, and that superiority is obvious when we compare their homes. What is missing from “Arisbe” is the account of the relationship between economics and writing that shows why Pope was better at making money than Peirce. But its absence does not imply its inaccessibility. In fact, the arrangement of the elements of the poem, which hang on the word “Arisbe,” demand that such an account be produced.

What’s at stake here is the difference between positing history as ultimately intelligible, even if we lack the knowledge to produce its intelligibility, and believing that history is ultimately unintelligible. This question is raised most forcefully by “Melville’s Marginalia,” in which the impossibility of Howe’s explanation is in tension with our need to come up with some account of the relationship between Mangan and Bartleby. Her interest in chance encounters and coincidences initially seems to indicate that any two historical events—the real life and death of James Clarence Mangan and the fictional life of Bartleby; the lasting aesthetic legacy of Alexander Pope and beautiful Twickenham, the failed philosophical legacy of Charles Saunders Peirce and Arisbe—can be made to cohere. But, as we shall see when we turn to “Souls of the Labadie Tract,” Howe’s chance encounters with the archives are in service of wholly traditional and normative interpretative and historical practices. Ironically, the normative aspects of Howe’s project allow her to posit a political project that is far more utopian than what is offered in the Occupy formation.
3. A Theory of Retrospect

The reason the selection from “Souls of the Labadie Tract” was so appealing to the authors of *A Third Fiery Flying Roule* is because it proposes a theory of the production of knowledge based on a shared identity between the speaker and the audience. That is, the fluidity of the speaker’s and audience’s identities—the way “you” turns into “we”—aligns with the participatory politics foundational to Occupy. In the poem as a whole, however, the figures’ identities are not at all fluid. At stake in my reading of “Souls” is how these pronouns are assigned and the consequences of such assignments for our understanding of the poem and its relationship to time.13

The poem has two speaking figures: one who uses only the first-person singular pronoun (“I”) and one who uses only the first-person plural pronoun (“we”). The figures are not named in the poem; when read in conjunction with “Personal Narrative,” it becomes clear that “I” is Susan Howe and “we” are the Labadists. “Souls” dramatizes the relationship between Howe and the objects of her study in a dialogue between “I” and “we.” Sections spoken from the “I” position, such as “I’d have gone in for you as I // am out and you’re forever in,” “I have to see / you fresh,” and “I have lost your world,” all describe the process of archival research (53, 50, 50). In contrast, the plural speakers’ statements bind them to the archival materials and history from which they emerge: “we’re the past,” “[a]ren’t odd books full of us,” “[a]ren’t we the very same / as we long ago saw,” and, with gallows humor, “we’ve been dying to show you” (39, 50, 51, 63). The identities of Howe and the Labadists do not blur in the poem; we always know who is speaking because of the number of the first-person pronoun.

That said, both Howe and the Labadists are called “you” when they occupy the objective position in the sentence (as in “I’d have gone in for you” and “we’ve been dying to show you”).
This coincidence is not the result of a fluidity of identity, but rather a contingency of modern English grammar: the words for the singular and plural second personal pronouns are identical. So, in “Souls of the Labadie Tract,” Howe does produce a kind of shared identity, but it is only shared insofar as both Howe and the Labadists are addressed by the other in the poem. The fact that they go by the same pronoun when functioning as objects of the sentence does not, however, blur their identity as subjects: the “I” and “we” remain distinct throughout.

William Montgomery describes the “surprisingly frequent” use of these pronouns as “a teasing and a testing of lyric boundaries… [that] explodes and reaffirms the convention of lyric address” (163). Because the poem presents a conversation between Howe and the Labadists, both occupy the position of lyric subject and lyric object at different times in the poem. As such, Montgomery argues, it conforms to Elizabeth Willis’s claims about the “flexibility, self-awareness, and multiplicity” of contemporary lyric (145). This is borne out in the following lyric, which also changes our understanding of the speakers’ relationship both to each other and to the audience. It reads:

…you
…yes yes you

with me here between us—of
our being together… (54)

Howe repeats and emphasizes “you,” placing it at the end of two consecutive lines, one of which ends a stanza. When we read the second stanza as a continuation of the first, it dramatically changes our understanding of the arrangement of the figures of the poem. Read this way, the middle section of the lyric reads, “yes yes you // with me here between us.” Based on the reading conventions so far established, we initially read the “you” as the Labadists, as the use of “me” suggests that the singular speaker (Howe) is the lyric subject. But the preposition “between” forces us to reconsider the relationship between the speakers. The Labadists (“you”) cannot be
simultaneously “with me” and “between us.” The only way to make sense of these lines is to posit a third figure, a third “you,” who never assumes the position of lyric speaker.

But, of course, the third figure has always been present: the audience. So far, however, we have been unacknowledged. At this moment, the entire perspective of the poem shifts, revealing that is not simply a dramatization of Howe’s long engagement with history, but an elaboration of how that engagement has become central to her aesthetic practice. In all her poems, Howe is “here between us,” because she mediates the reader’s relationship to history by presenting it. When the figures of the poem turn to and acknowledge the audience, Howe demonstrates that she is, indeed, playing with the lyric form, and importantly for our purposes, the relationship between the lyric poem and the audience.

The first thing to note is that Howe’s acknowledgement of the audience is by no means an invitation for the audience to participate in the production of the poem. Howe reserves the first-person singular pronoun for the figure “between” the subject of the poem and its audience, thereby insisting on the necessity of the author to the poem. She is between the audience and history, both mediator and gatekeeper. “Souls of the Labadie Tract,” then describes a different relationship between audience and speaker than the one on which the open text and the human mic are founded. In “Souls,” the audience does not have direct access to the material; we can hear the Labadists only when Howe is between us and them. As such, the poem is not “open to the world and particularly the reader,” nor is it subject to “subsequent compositions by readers” (43). It is, on Hejinian’s account, a closed text, because, by keeping author and audience separate, it insists on the authority of the author.

Further, by keeping author and audience separate, Howe’s poetry has a fundamentally different temporality than the open text. In the lyric above, it becomes clear that “you” is not part
of the dialogic exchange between Howe and the Labadists, but, in fact, an apostrophe to the
audience. While the audience was absent at the time of composition, they are present at the time
of reading. As such, “Souls” depends on the existence of a future in which the poem will be read.
Howe’s “testing and teasing” of traditional lyric address underlines the temporal distance
between author and reader, while also highlighting lyric’s ability to bring together distant
temporal moments by staging a conversation between a twenty-first century poet and an
eighteenth century religious sect for the benefit of the audience that may (or may not) be just as
temporally distant.

For Howe, this temporal distance belongs both to the poem and the archive. In her
description of her relationship to the archive in “Personal Narrative,” Howe writes, “[t]he future
seemed to lie in this forest of letters, theories, and forgotten actualities” (14). Here, past and
future are condensed into the present moment. The past is available to Howe in the library, but it
isn’t the past as such: it’s a wilderness, “a forest of letters.” Moreover, the past that’s there
consists of “forgotten actualities.” That phrase speaks to the way in which the past functions as a
given—there’s no changing it—and how the conditions under which the past might be made
legible on its own terms are lost. At the same time, however, it is in this wild and half-forgotten
place that Howe locates the future. Along similar lines, Howe writes in 2014’s *Spontaneous
Particulars* that the “visionary spirit” of poetry, “a deposit from a future yet to come, is gathered
and guarded in the domain of research libraries and special collections” (17). For Howe, the
future is located in the past.

As she goes on, it becomes evident that the relationship between the past and future that
the archives give her access to sheds light in both directions. She writes, “I had a sense of the
parallel between our always fragmentary knowledge and the continual progress toward perfect
understanding that never withers away” (14). Following her condensation of past and future into the present, Howe posits an asymptotic teleology. The track of “our always fragmentary knowledge” approaches “perfect understanding,” but never quite reaches it. The archive, in Howe’s work, is the place in which such a “perfect understanding” can be reached for, if not achieved.

We saw already the ways in which Howe’s use of innovative forms works to visualize her relationship to history. In both the word-square and the collage poem, Howe represents how history is made—how past events are turned into a historical record, and the necessary violence done as a result. The archives are, on one hand, a place in which “hunted, captured, guarded and preserved” objects and manuscripts are “shut carefully away, outside an economy of use” (Spontaneous 24). This speaks to a particular kind of accumulative violence that restricts the possibilities for fully understanding the past. At the same time, however, the archive waits for “an encounter of the mind of a curious read, a researcher, an antiquarian, a bibliomaniac, a sub sub librarian, a poet,” like the encounter staged in “Souls of the Labadie Tract” (24) Such an encounter, in which the past is “re-animated, re-collected (recollected),” makes the voices silenced by history—voices of women, people of color, and religious and political dissidents—once again available (24). In this sense, Howe’s project is cousin to Walter Benjamin’s historical materialism. In the rediscovery and recirculation of these lost objects, manuscripts, and ideas, the past is brought to us for reconsideration in its fullness: the archive, for Howe, is the only place where the past might become, in Benjamin’s terms, fully citable.14

Thus, the archive for Howe is a utopic site, in which the “forgotten actualities” are transformed into “a future yet to come” (Souls 14, Spontaneous 24). Although the future in which the past is fully citable, or, in her formulation, the future in which the track of our “always
fragmentary knowledge” approaches “perfect understanding,” may never come, for Howe, the archive represents the possibility of such a future, which depends on the possibility of making both past and future intelligible.

But how can we render the past—a “forest of...forgotten actualities”—and the future intelligible? The revelation of a fully citable past seems mystical, but Howe’s understanding of the transformation of chance into order renders the process almost as quotidian as Hejinian’s ordinary spoon. Because the future is found in the past, both of which are only ever available to us in the present, then the transformation of any event into history is simply its configuration into a formal order. Mitchell’s preface to *Three Inquiries* renders Mohammed Bouazizi’s citable, because it is a link in the chain of events that led to increased democratic participation in Tunisia and the global Occupy movement. For Howe, the Labadists’ Maryland settlement because citable as a result of their integration into the poem “Souls of the Labadie Tract.” These chance events have created an inexorable order: the order of the historical record.

The production of order depends upon the selection of content. As such, “subsequent compositions” by readers would threaten the cause-and-effect form required by narrative accounts. The history of the Arab Spring presented in Mitchell’s contributions to *Three Inquiries* cite Bouazizi as the starting point of the revolutions, choosing it—rather than any other plausible event—as the moment at which the Arab Spring began. Howe’s project—which she will not finish, but whose incompleteness is not the same as its impossibility—is to deliver a complete history; its process is to reveal the order created by chance events and “tiny occurrences,” describing each moment’s necessity to our understanding of the past.15

Such a theory of both poetry and history is, in fact, condensed in the opening lyric from “Souls of the Labadie Tract.”
Indifferent truth and trust
...
That we are come to that
Between us here to know
Things in the perfect way (27)

The second line of the second stanza—“between us here”—should remind us of the section above in which Howe first acknowledges the audience. Here, the relationship “between us here” is the mechanism by which writer and audience might “know / Things in the perfect way.” That is, for Howe, the separation of author and audience is necessary for the production of “perfect knowledge,” or, in the language of “Personal Narrative,” “perfect understanding.” This, then, is the force of describing truth as “indifferent” in the opening line: in Howe’s conception of the relationship “between us here,” the work of art is indifferent to its audience.

“[K]now[ing] / Things in the perfect way” describes the production and transmission of knowledge that is fundamentally opposed to what seemed to be described in the lyric deployed by A Third Fiery Flying Roule. There, the transmission of knowledge depends on the identity between speaker and audience. A closer examination of the formal features of that section reveals that Howe does not believe this model of epistemology is plausible. The first two stanzas read, again:

“Here we are”—You can’t
hear us without having to be
us knowing everything we

know—you know you can’t (58)

The first and fourth lines end with “can’t,” giving added emphasis to the difficulty, if not impossibility, of such an epistemological method. Further, the same auditory play that allows “here” to mean “hear” can render “know” as “no,” turning the middle line into “no — you no you can’t,” a statement of pure negativity and impossibility. Rather than calling for a utopic production of knowledge through shared identity, the lyric marshaled by Occupy calls the very
procedure of the human mic (and, with it, the open text) into question. When put back into the context of “Souls of the Labadie Tract,” we see that the production of knowledge described in this section functions as a foil to another model of knowledge production and shared identity. “Souls” argues that we “come to know / Things in the perfect way” through our role as audience members. The epistemological model proposed by “Souls of the Labadie Tract” is the production of knowledge through interpretation. What the author of A Third Fiery Flying Roule believes to be the point of “Souls of the Labadie Tract” is raised in the poem only to be dismissed in favor of an understanding of the relationship between speaker and audience that is fundamentally opposed to the participatory aesthetics and politics of both Occupy and the open text.

That is, as Howe’s poetry reveals, the construction of the autonomous aesthetic object is itself a theory of politics. The poem’s indifference to its audience does require the audience to act upon it, but as interpreters, not composers. The willful conversion of chance elements into necessity in the formal construction of the poem, unchanged by and indifferent to its interpreting audience, is the point at which the poem and politics touch. It provides a theory of the conversion of past events into history (perhaps even History), which is required for any political intervention.

Because Occupy demands the participatory composition of texts, thereby rejecting the production of ordered content, it cannot produce the conditions under which its intervention into contemporary politics should be understood. That is, it cannot posit its place within history without fundamentally undoing its own revolutionary politics. Howe’s aesthetic commitments and their political entailments oppose the participatory and horizontal structure of Occupy. But, embedded in them is the very theory of revolutionary transformation Occupy cannot produce.
Notes to Chapter 4

1 See Will Montgomery’s *Poetry of Susan Howe: History, Theology, Authority* for a reading of how the theology of the Labadists, which he describes as a “processural collage,” relates to both Howe’s larger project and the two other key figures in the collection, Jonathan Edwards and Wallace Stevens (161).

2 Sarah Resnick provides an example of the crowd’s refusal in one of her contributions to *Occupy! Scenes from Occupied America*. She writes, describing the October 7, 2011 General Assembly, “a man who claimed to carry a message from the Egyptian revolution spoke to the GA [General Assembly]: ‘Choose your leaders now!’ he cried. ‘Choose one demand now or your movement is lost!’ The human mic ceased amplification, drowned by audible disapproval. This ‘leaderless resistance movement with people of many political persuasions,’ as it calls itself, was not about to concede autonomy or participatory democracy or any of its founding tenets—at least not yet” (53–54).

3 It is worth distinguishing between three time frames for the Occupy movement. In the planning stages and the first few days of the Wall Street occupation, the desire was to formulate a demand and then “incessantly repeat [it]… in a plurality of voices” (“Revolutionary Tactics”). Mark Grief’s description of his first day at Occupy Wall Street reveals that this was, at least initially, the plan: “[w]e joined up, sat down, and did what the organizers asked, which was to discuss which proposals or demands were most important to us, for this collective gathering. These would be put to the General Assembly for public discussion, so this large group of strangers could determine its purpose” (*Occupy!* 3). As note 2 indicates, however, as early as October 7—less than three weeks after the Occupation began—the focus of the General Assemblies and the camp’s understanding of itself had shifted radically. As the crowd’s reaction to the message from Egypt indicates, the suggestion to “[c]hoose one demand” was now understood as inimical to the movement. Rather than issuing demands, the work of Occupy and its General Assemblies became the work of maintaining the camp. *Occupy!* is full of these details: how laundry was done, how power was generated, how the camp responded to safety and security concerns, how a conflict between the drum circles and other protestors almost shut the camp down, and so on. There are, of course, significant differences between the politics and practices of Occupy-associated groups and camps globally. All of the first-hand accounts of the camp I will be citing refer to the camp in Zuccotti Park. These accounts are being read in the final time frame under consideration here—the present, four years after the initial camp was founded, in which critics, myself included, weigh in on the meaning of the occupation. That there are discrepancies between how the Occupiers themselves understood what they were doing and how critics have come to understand the import of the occupation is no surprise. This is not to say that the authors of *Occupy: Three Inquiries in Disobedience*, which is my primary source for interpretations of Occupy and which also attends primarily to the New York camp, are misrepresenting the movement. Rather, it is to point to the difference between how we experience something as it is happening and how we interpret it later—a difference that will be central to my arguments about the political stakes of the Occupy movement below.

4 Hejinian cites John Cage’s chance operations and Bernadette Mayer’s *Midwinter Day* as examples of this kind of form. With regard to Mayer, she writes, “[t]he work begins when the clock is set running… and ends when the time allotted to the work runs out” (46). Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Traffic and Day* were composed with the same principles.

5 Hejinian’s claim is a re-articulation of the heresy of paraphrase, in which a poem is said “not to mean / But be” (MacLeish, “Ars Poetica”). If “[t]he meaning of the ordinary spoon is the ordinary spoon,” then the meaning of *Stanzas in Meditation* must be the poem itself: to summarize, condense, or otherwise paraphrase the poem would lose its meaning. In *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, Jennifer Ashton masterfully draws out the connection between the New Critical belief that “the best interpretation of the poem is the poem itself” and the work of the Language Writers, Lyn Hejinian in particular, arguing that both “equat[e] experience with interpretation” (9–10).

6 As with the heresy of paraphrase, we find here a conflation of the reader’s experience of the text (its effects on her) and her interpretation of it. See Ashton (2–11).

7 See the Introduction, pages ** to ** for more on this.
That said, the essays and reports that fill *Occupy!,* which were written during the encampment, all manage to avoid projecting the authors’ feelings about the movement onto their subjects, instead treating all the participants as autonomous individuals capable, if they wanted, of expressing their own thoughts and ideas about the revolution.

As such, the film that perhaps best imitates the form of *Occupy* is Harmony Korine’s 2012 *Spring Breakers.* When Alien (James Franco) tries to convince the three young women to stay in St. Petersburg and help him run his drug cartel, he promises them “Spring Break forever.”

“Personal Narrative” uses selections from “Articulations of Sound Forms in Time” as the central example of her archival work. *My Emily Dickinson, The Birth-Mark, The Liberties* and, as we shall see shortly, “Melville’s Marginalia” and *Pierce-Arrow* also depend on her encounter with the archives. Most recently *Spontaneous Particulars* (2014), which I will briefly address below, further explicates Howe’s relationship to the archive.

What Howe here describes might be understood as a version of the Kantian sublime, where the sight of an object (a mountain) or event (shipwreck) is too large or complicated for the human mind. The mind, aware of its failure to account for the sight, is comforted by its discovery of its own limits. Howe explicitly cites Kant in a much earlier poem, “Articulations of Sound Forms in Time.” While it would be interesting to see exactly how Kant’s aesthetic philosophy fits into Howe’s poetics, it is far beyond the scope of the current argument.

Interestingly, Howe levels many of these accusations at Perry Miller, a great friend of her parents and a critic whose work Howe describes as “indispensable for any real understanding of the early history of New England.” (*Birth-Mark* 161). She says she knew Miller “as a lecherous character who drank too much. He is supposed to have been an inspiring teacher. To us daughters of professors, he was the object of great scorn because we knew that if he was at one of our houses, he would quickly get red-faced and then his hands would start wandering. His wife, Betty, who I believe did half of his research for him, was silent and shadowy” (160).

There is lot to say about “Souls of the Labadie Tract” and about the collection which it names. I will limit myself here to the way in which the assignment of pronouns articulates a particular relationship between the author and audience and a particular temporal relationship between the time of composition and the time of reading. As such, I will not be able to address a number of important aspects of the poem, including, for example, the allusions to other literary texts. Further, although I will touch on Howe’s use of lyric conventions, I will not examine them in depth. I encourage readers to see Montgomery, *Poetry of Susan Howe: History, Theology, Authority,* especially pages 160–66, for his excellent reading of these issues.

In “Theses on the Concept of History,” Benjamin writes that the goal of the historian is to deliver the “past, in each of its moments, [as] citable.”

Here we can find one final point of divergence between Howe and Hejinian. While Howe’s project is to participate in the production of a “complete” history, Hejinian understands the product of such a production to be “insufferable.” She writes, in “The Rejection of Closure,” that the “complete text, the text that contains everything, would in fact be a closed text. It would be insufferable” (56).
“Oh to be form’s content”:

Poetry and Capital as Totality

“Apology,” which appears late in Joshua Clover’s 2015 collection *Red Epic*, begins:

Oh capital, let’s kiss and make up
And I’ll take back all the those terrible things I said about you
To my friends and in poems. (48)

The poem’s olive branch to capital is surprising, as the book so far has been composed of
“terrible things… said” about capital, particularly contemporary finance capital. But in

“Apology,” the speaker tries to see it from capital’s point of view:

It must be hard to hold the things of the world in an order
While studiously skirting the question of whether you yourself
Are a thing and I can imagine the anxiety this causes but capital
Don’t you ever lie on the couch near the coffee in the late morning
Flipping through a magazine you picked up in one of your
Supermarkets in California until you come to a photo
Of Britney Speakers in flip-flops and drag—you know
Sort of like googling yourself? Just to verify your own
Existence in real life. What a relief. (48)

The appearance of Britney is “a relief,” an answer to the question of whether capital is itself is “a thing.” There’s something perfect in Clover’s selection of Britney as a response to capital’s
nagging anxiety: she is the form of appearance of a whole segment of the culture industry that
would prefer to stay invisible. (A segment of the culture industry, it is worth noting, that poetry
has “studiously skirt[ed]” being consumed by in much the same way capital has “studiously
skirt[ed]” confirming its “own existence in real life.”) But I want to suggest that we attend to the
other cultural product mentioned in the poem: “Supermarkets in California.” The phrase, of
course, evokes Allen Ginsberg’s poem. It’s no longer “A Supermarket in California”; it’s now
“your / Supermarkets in California,” implying that the poem not only belongs to and but also has
been franchised by capital. In the 1955 poem, Ginsberg asks Whitman to describe “what
America” he saw; sixty years later, the speaker of “Apology” asks capital a variation on the same
question: “what America” does capital see when it flips through magazines? As such, it suggests some continuity between the project of the poet and the project of capital. In fact, as “Apology” goes on, the speaker indicates that poets have quite a bit to learn from capital:

…Could poets
Ever hate idealism as much as you do? No ideas but in
Money. Thus your sweetness: the portability and persistence
Of ideas that have given us so much pleasure and move
As pleasure must move through the gold integument
Of this life. Oh to be form’s content. (48–49)

Williams’s poetic maxim is revised: no longer “no ideas but in things,” capital provides us with “no ideas but in / Money.” Money describes how capital can become “form’s content”: the idea (capital) materialized (as money) is also the content (money) that articulates the form (capital). To borrow from Denise Levertov’s explication of Williams’s mantra, the relationship between money and capital is the “equipoise of thing and idea” (141).

“Apology,” then, provides one final articulation of totality in the dissertation. We find ourselves confronted with an old poetic problem under a new valence. The relationship and distinction between form and content is reshaped so that the totality captured in the tension between form and content turns into a new totality, now constituted by poetry and capitalism. Three books of contemporary poetry—Red Epic, Jasper Bernes’s We Are Nothing and So Can You, and Stephen Collis’s To the Barricades—draw out the strange continuity between lyric and capital. This happens first formally: as we shall see when we read Red Epic next to Clover’s critical writing, the basic element of poetics—the line—can be read productively as a replication and disruption of the temporality of finance capital. This temporality, it turns out, is the alternation between narrative and non-narrative we have been tracing all along. In both the form and content of We Are Nothing and To the Barricades, we see how the aesthetic configuration of lyric and narrative, now under the valence of lyric and capital, makes history appear. These
poems produce, rather than contain, history. In them we are confronted with post-revolutionary worlds that, like the lyric form, are continuous with and yet radically different from contemporary capitalism.

1. A pause, eros, a sum on paper

In both Clover’s article “Retcon: Value and Temporality in Poetics” and Red Epic, he demonstrates the formal identity between the procedures of poetic meaning-making and capitalist value-realization. He writes that poetic meaning happens in the “drama between sentence and line, period and carriage return, point and counterpoint” (20). As such, it intensifies the temporal conflict inherent in any sentence. As he writes,

The contingency of meaning itself, the continuous activity of reinterpretation, the simultaneous motion by which each step forward must throw the mind backward as well—as Lacan shows, this is a characteristic of grammar in general. Always there, humming in the background. Poetry is defined in part as the language game that takes this motion as a constructive principle, formalizing the contradiction and intensifying its experience. (20)

The “characteristic of grammar in general” is the fact that we don’t know exactly what a sentence means until we get to the end of it. Reading is always an act of re-reading, of revising our understanding as we move through a sentence. The forward motion that leads us to the final punctuation mark is matched with a backward movement in which we account for what has come before. The line break, which intensifies this motion, is the constitutive principle of poetic form. And this motion—forward and backward at the same time—is, Clover argues, the motion of value production in the era of finance capital.

The era Clover is engaged with is inaugurated by the Black-Sholes formula, generally regarded as responsible for the boom in derivative markets and its attendant crash in 2008. By beginning with the option’s price at maturity and working backwards to assess the risk and volatility of the product, the Black-Sholes formula allows for “mathematically rational option
pricing, independent of guesswork about future turns of the market or the beliefs of investors” (11). To put it in grammatical terms, the Black-Sholes formula allows us to start at the end of the sentence and work backward. It does this, Clover explains, by producing a “smooth ‘pricing surface’ in the present. The future is given as a fact; the present is repriced continuously as we approach that future, a ceaseless activity of reinterpretation” (18). What is presented “as a fact” in the retroactive mathematics of Black-Sholes is, in fact, constantly revised as the present “approach[es] that future.” It is uncannily like the way we read poetry. But, in Black-Sholes, the motion between the end point and the present is hidden; in fact, it must be, or else the “smooth ‘pricing surface’” would begin to crack. The line break, in contrast, “denaturalizes this motion, reveals the operation concealed beneath” (20). As such, because the poem and finance capital share a temporal structure, the lyric poem allows us to see the otherwise hidden operations of finance capital.

In “Years of Analysis for a Day of Synthesis,” Clover puts his argument from “Retcon” into a familiar lyric form:

…still unable to arrive at the end of the sentence where words realized their meaning except to hurry on and this restless motion marks the adventure of value set loose in the circuits and unable to know itself without arriving headlong at the price briefly valorized a pause eros a sum on paper (6)

Lyric reading practices are aligned with “the adventure of value,” highlighting the perpetual motion shared by both lyric and capital. Clover intensifies this motion by making use of Williams’s triadic line, which stands in for both the poem’s and capital’s “restless motion.” But
the final line of this quotation—“a pause eros a sum on paper”—stops, momentarily, the poem’s and capital’s motion. It is, of course, a revision of one of the refrains from Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*. (The original is “a pause, a rose, something on paper.”) The minor changes make it feel as if the original has been misheard—a “Hold Me Closer, Tony Danza” for the LangPo set. But the new version highlights the way the lyric form both participates in and breaks up the “restless motion” from sentence to sentence, from M to C to M’. As “a sum on paper,” it coincides with finance capital. But it also signifies “a pause,” as the line break reveals the structure of “the adventure of value,” emphasized by its position as the first of a new triadic set. As such, it is the poetic articulation of Clover’s contention that the line break makes the value-producing operations of finance capital visible.

The formal identity between lyric and capitalist time is also the mechanism by which Clover makes history appear:

To say it is new era is to say
it has discovered a new style of time
we do
not do this in language
first but in terrain we have not chosen and do not yet understand
language meets us there and must be cajoled
into open air
by dangling the old forms
in their wrack and wreckage
this is the poetic thought (21)

“Poetic thought,” then, is also the process through which the “new style of time” is made visible—“cajoled / into open air.” It is, as I have been arguing so far, the aesthetic configuration that makes history appear. But *We Are Nothing and To the Barricades* are not interested in the appearance of history generally; rather, they use the lyric form to imagine the history of a post-capitalist future.
We Are Nothing is divided between verse, written from the standpoint of the present, and prose, written from the standpoint of the future. The verse sections depict an ongoing struggle against capital and the state; the prose sections depict the world after an un-narrated revolution.

In an interview with Zac Gunter for the Los Angeles Review of Books, Bernes explains:

the prosimetric form is designed to model the dynamic movement of history itself. The alternation between lines and sentences, between present and future, presents a decomposition of historical change into its linear and the elliptical determinants, where “verse” turns and returns upon itself, moving in circles, and “prose” moves forward in a straight line. History, encompassing both of these forms of motion, moves in a spiral, producing the genuinely new through a recycling of elements of the old. The shuttling between verse and prose (and between a present and a future described in a narrative past tense) explores as form the ways in which antagonist forces in the present, projecting themselves into a future, end up producing a past, a history.

Here, the relationship between prose and verse is not meant to model capital, but to model history in very much the same way I have been describing. The motion of lyric (circular) and narrative (linear) are opposed; when put together, we see history, which “encompass[es] both of these forms of motion.” Further, the alternation between the present and future that constitutes We Are Nothing produces history in the same way Howe’s mediation between the audience and archival materials does. As we saw above, Howe’s normative account of the poem as “indifferent” to the audience requires the projection of a future in which the poem will be read.

In We Are Nothing, Bernes makes this formal structure part of the content of the poem as the “antagonist forces in the present, project[…] themselves into a future, end up producing a past, a history.”

Stephen Collis seems, at first, to have a very different formal take on the production of history than Bernes. His most recent collection, To the Barricades, is one part of what Collis describes as a “life-long poem,” The Barricades Project. In, “The Barricades Project, the Life-Long Poem, and the Politics of Form Notes towards a Prospectus,” he positions his project with
other life-long poems, including the *Cantos* and *Paterson*. These poems, Collis argues, are defined by “deferral: the poem one reads, piece-meal, is understood as *provisional*, incomplete in its particular manifestation, with more of it to come—even possibly its hypothetical completion—in future manifestations” (7). This “hypothetical completion,” Collis argues, is a utopian project, but one “where the realization of utopia is (at best!) still a distant, incomplete project.” As such, the key formal element is “aesthetic incompleteness” (8).

The incompletion of the project aligns with the presentism I attributed to the Occupy collective above. But, we might read it as an elaboration of one part of the production of history Bernes and Howe engage in, as Collis’s project also depends on the production of an imagined future. The only difference is that while *We Are Nothing* presents that imagined future, Collis defers it. Further, their theories of form are in agreement with Clover’s argument in “*Retcon*.”

The alternation between verse and prose and between present and future anterior that allows history to appear in *We Are Nothing* is the same “motion by which each step forward must throw the mind backward” that Clover attributes to verse generally and Bernes describes as the movement “where ‘verse’ turns and returns upon itself.” Likewise, Collis’s interest in the deferral of completion extends the pause between the “step forward” and the mental leap backward to make meaning. Each of these, then, demonstrates the formal capability of lyric to produce history.

2. The past was coming for us

The production of history is equally important to the content of *We Are Nothing* and *To the Barricades*. This is perhaps most obvious in *To the Barricades*, as it is engaged in linking contemporary resistance movements to the Paris Commune. The first and final sections of “La Commune [1871]” are paratactical catalogs of revolutionary dates. The poem begins:
In the spring of 1871
In June 1848
On September 4 1870
As was the case in 1830 and 1848
Early on the morning of 18 March (43)

The lines mark the time of an event, but refuse to give readers the content. Of course, many of Collis’s readers will not need the content of these days and years filled in, as each refers to one of the French Communes. As the poem goes on, the Cultural Revolution in China, the October Revolution in Russia, and the global student protests of May 1968 are added to the list. In the final section, Collis includes dates from the recent past:

In the middle of October 2011
When in September 2011
Then in October in cities across
While October was breaking
On January 25 2011 (56)

This framing device, in which dates function as content-less markers of revolutionary events, links the history of revolution from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the beginning of a new revolutionary moment, inaugurated by the occupation of Zuccotti Park in September 2011. To put it in the language Bernes’s used to describe his method, Collis wants to “produc[e] the genuinely new through a recycling of elements of the old.” That said, the elision of content, which meets Collis’s formal goal of aesthetic incompletion, is the very process by which the Occupy movement has connected itself to the Arab Spring, the occupation of the Wisconsin State Capital, and the horizontalidad movement.

Despite the similarity between Collis’s catalog of revolutions and the political form of Occupy, he does insist on the development of content: “[b]eginnings can then be measured by the re-beginnings they authorize / The Task is to think its content” (44). The temporal markers point to a revolution’s beginning in some way “authorize[d]” by a prior revolution; the content is newly invented in each case. In the middle sections of “La Commune [1871],” Collis does this
work, or, perhaps more accurately, thinks what the 2011 protests are meant to resist, pointing to financial corruption (“let’s not lack audacity / in dealing with the banks [45]), the erosion of civil liberties (“even in a democracy / we aren’t free to demonstrate freely” [45]), the failure of democratic principles (“it’s time we stop being represented and start being” [45]), the threat of global capital (“burn down markets” [46], “We’ve had our labour / dematerialized” [48]), and police brutality (“it was easier / to meet us with / tear gas clubs / pepper spray” [51]). In “La Commune [1871],” the form of past revolutions is placed side-by-side with an articulation of present-day resistance. Because the content of the Paris Communes, the Cultural Revolution, the October Revolution, and the ’68 student strike is omitted, Collis fills a form from the past with the content of the present.

The past bears down on the present in We Are Nothing as well. In an early prose section, the speaker and his comrades are “barricaded inside the Louvre” after a conflict with the police (13). They find messages from lost friends in the library: “they said that half of the past was coming for us, was against, and that half of the past was coming for us, was for (13).” Unlike Collis, the speaker of We Are Nothing sees not only historic forms that might be useful for present resistance, but the history of capital that the revolutionaries are trying to tear down.

As it happens, though, neither the antagonistic nor the sympathetic past ever reaches the characters of We Are Nothing. In the section quoted above, the speaker explains that the past never arrives because the revolutionaries’ movements “push[…] the past behind even when it was in front” (13). The inexorable motion forward keeps them separate from the past, in an image reminiscent of Benjamin’s Angel of History who “would like to stay… But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future” (257–58). A later section of
*We Are Nothing* offers some explanation of the radical separation between past and present: “We are not capable of time travel, says Maya, because we have yet to create the present” (65). Central to the imagining of the future, then, is being able to see the present. This corresponds not only to Howe’s work on the availability of both past and future in the present, but also might answer my critique of the presentism of the Occupy movement above. In fact, one way of understanding the prosimetric form of *We Are Nothing* and the parataxis in *To the Barricades* would be to say that they are engaged in the creation of a present from which the revolution will be launched.

3. Year Zero

The post-revolutionary worlds envisioned by Collis and Bernes are recognizable, made of the past. In both, a figure that is central to contemporary capitalism—expansion and circulation, respectively—is transformed. On one hand, the continued presence of the remnants of capitalism means that neither poet presents the post-capitalist world as utopian. On the other hand, the means by which these capitalist figures are transformed provides us a way of thinking through a break with the present.

The final poem of *To the Barricades*, “Almost Islands,” is dedicated to the Tsawwassen Peninsula where Collis lives. As he explains in the acknowledgements section, the peninsula “was once an island several kilometers offshore, now gathered in by the delta the Fraser River pushed south of Vancouver. This fertile farmland is currently being swallowed up by expanding container and coal ports” (146). The space of Tsawwassen serves as an apt metaphor for capitalist expansion—as soon as new land is created by nature, it is swallowed up by capitalism.

The opening section of the poem points to capitalism’s speed, paired with its culturally destructive properties:
I have been to a small place its farms paved under …
for international flows free-trade zones …
criss-crossing monocultures they could not for a moment think of a future that wouldn’t arrive by container (121)

The expansion of land that turned the island into a peninsula invites capitalism, which marks the destruction of culture and foreclosure of other possibilities: the world is a “monoculture[e]” and the only future available is one produced by capitalism, delivered by container ship. But as the poem continues, the destruction of spatial boundaries becomes a technology for resistance. In the “Threshold Song” at the center of the “Almost Islands,” Collis present expansion under both negative and positive valences. First, the negative:

If an oil spill come if a river if some coastal water coil about islets tanker cringed it will be done and any seal’s death diminishes me

any cormorant’s any otter’s any salmon’s any orca’s

because I am involved in all the water world (130)

There are two ways in which boundaries are broken down here. First, capital, in the form of “an oil spill” and a “tanker” invades the natural world. This invasion reveals the connection between
Collis and the animals who inhabit the Tsawwassen peninsula. This begins to show that connection is not an inherently capitalist figure. The poem continues:

our economics
no island no
ecos to home
and if we are back
at the commons
if nothing not
connected to
everything else (131)

The appearance of the commons—and humanity’s arrival back at that state—functions first negatively. It is evidence of global capitalism (“nothing not / connected to / everything else”) and ecological destruction (“no / ecos to home”). But Collis figures our arrival at “the commons” as a “return.” That is, “nothing not / connected to / everything else” is simultaneously a figure for the global expansion of capital and the global resistance to it. The poem, then, reveals the ambivalence of connection. On one hand, the connection between the mainland and the Tsawwassen Peninsula allowed for the expansion of capitalism; on the other hand, that very connection transforms into the return to collectivity, figured as “the commons.” Connection becomes, then, an empty form, one that is alternately filled with the expansionary drive of capitalism and the development of global resistance against it. As such, it works with the emptied temporal markers of historical revolution to demonstrate a continuity between capitalism and revolution.

That said, we might—and, in fact, I will below—critique Collis for a kind of regressive turn in “Almost Islands,” where the only future possible is, it turns out, a utopian past. His struggle to imagine a world otherwise is perhaps best captured by the image of revolution at the end of “Almost Islands”:

in the sea legions
of fish gather and
drive a wedge between
the dock and the
ship awaiting its
containered dream
salmon pour upstream
arched and red as flags
a herd of caribou
unseen in these parts
for centuries occupies
estuary and ducks
in droves land and
take out the dykes
letting the Fraser
run where it will (138–39)

In these lines, fish, caribou, and ducks blockade capital, imitating the forms of resistance already enacted by humans. This “natural” revolution indicates the impossibility of imagining a human-made revolution. As Collis writes, “it’s almost miraculous / where miraculous / means the potential / for something else / to still occur” (138). But, as we shall see now, there is nothing “miraculous” in the potential revolution.

*We Are Nothing* produces a different continuity with and difference from (or, identity of identity and difference with) capitalist society. In the opening verse section, Bernes writes:

it’s year zero and the hedges
the sandbags the barricades have
collapsed and now we finally fit into
the size zero dresses, our address is null
and void rogue waves of payment
dunk the Nelson Mandela parkway
automaton of thing-thinging-things
which people hyphenate or sometimes
the malformed stumps of public metals
by dumping the Rand on the open market
wet paperbacks, a stained eviction letter
dollhouse beside a container of cornmeal
it looks like the libertarians got here first (7)

“Year zero” indicates that we are at the beginning of the new social formation that has replaced capitalism. Its arrival is marked by the fall of “the hedges / the sandbags the barricades.” These
markers bring up a number of possible historical references. “[H]edges” might refer to hedge funds, but we might also read them as part of the expansionary tactics of private property during the enclosure movement in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. “Sandbags” can be used to build barricades, but when put next to image of a “dunk[ed]” “Nelson Mandela parkway” and “the wet paperbacks,” they call to mind Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy. And barricades are as available to revolutionaries—from the Paris Communes to the Black Lives Matter movement—as they are to the state. At no point is “year zero” presented as purely utopian. The fact that “we finally fit into / the size zero dresses” might mark a longed-for state of physical perfection or starvation; the “null and / void” street addresses could indicate the end of private property or the mass destruction of real estate as the result of natural disaster. As the section goes on, the world appears more and more grim and chaotic, as pieces of the capitalist system become agents of physical destruction and “malformed stumps of public metals” are produced through currency trades. A world of “wet paperbacks, a stained eviction letter / dollhouse beside a container of cornmeal” and the competition between the speaker and “the libertarians” all seem more at home in *The Walking Dead* than the coming communist utopia. In these lines, the future has not fully broken with the past—the past of the commons, the Commune, of hurricanes, of roadways named for famous people, of political divisiveness. The only new world possible is, *We Are Nothing* indicates, a world made of pieces of the one we are in.

But that isn’t to say it’s the same world. Throughout the prose sections that account for half of *We Are Nothing*, Bernes uses the figure of circulation to demonstrate the post-revolutionary world’s radical break with the world of capitalism. In a section set during the revolution, the speaker describes one of their tactics:

We get an old city bus and give it the number of a line that doesn’t exist—47 or 810. Immediately, we exclude all those sad characters who know where they are
going and want to go there, who think in terms of means and ends, origin and destination, or who are compelled to do so for reasons of material or perhaps moral circumstance. (37–38)

The mis-numbered buses serve as a way of uniting a certain set of people: those with either the right attitude (they don’t think “in terms of means and ends”) or enough freedom (are not “compelled” to think this way) to participate in the revolution. As it spreads, the recruitment tactic turns into a tactic for supplying the revolutionaries:

Eventually we have so many buses running, so many constantly improvised lines, and so many partisans running into and out of the buses and grabbing provisions off the shelves in the corner shops, with or without guns, and taking the gas that we need from the gas stations, with or without guns, with or without leaving the mutilated corpses of police… (38)

How can we understand this image as anything but an image of circulation? The circulation is not capitalist circulation, no: the “provisions” and “gas” that keep the buses running are “grabbed” and “taken” “with or without” violence, not purchased; M-C-M' is no longer the general formula for society. This is the circulation of bodies, of revolutionaries, opposed to capitalist circulation.

A later prose section shows how this initial tactic for circulating bodies has developed into a new way of circulating products:

[T]wo giant warehouses… swell with shifting mounds of bolts and ball bearings and vats of pickled cabbage. Also: transistors, scarves, batteries, beans, toothpaste, bags of cumin and pepper and salt, textbooks, toys and waterclocks. Superabundances from each of the 500 towns and zones to the west and north and south. Everything that can’t be discharged internally or among neighbors ends up here, available to any and to all, because what finds no place in satisfaction of direct or indirect want must remain in motion until it becomes useful. The flows cross but are never exchanged thing for thing, object for object. (52)

The two warehouses hold all objects that do not find immediate use; they are available here, not for exchange, but the satisfaction of want and need. The continuous circulation of buses in the
previous section transforms into the continuous circulation of products: they “must remain in motion until [they] become useful.”

The warehouses still deal in the circulation of people, but in a different form. They have become depots for “those persons who have come to feel, in one way or another, in excess of their place in the world” (53). These people come to the depots to swap their identity out for another. Like the exchange of excess goods in the warehouses, there is no one-to-one exchange: a person may “invent an entirely fictive self” and then “forward [it] to the depot for listing” (53). This great identity exchange—in which “fully half of all people will” participate—mirrors the exchange of goods above. A great storehouse keeps “superabundances” of products and identities until a person should find it useful to pick them up again. The image of non-capitalist exchange might read as naïve. But because Bernes puts it next to the magical-realist identity exchange, it indicates that this isn’t a sincere program for a new society. Rather, what the revision of the figure of circulation does in We Are Nothing is model the form of thought required to build this new form of life.

In both Bernes and Collis, the primary form of either the revolution or the post-revolutionary world is continuous with a category of capitalism. For Bernes, a method of circulation opposed to capitalist circulation is the identifying feature of the future he imagines. For Collis, the very connection that allowed for capitalist expansion will be the thing that allows for anti-capitalist revolution. He may figure this uprising as a natural one, but the networks he describes aren’t much different from the utopian potentials attributed to social media. In both of these books, the authors have taken a category central to capitalist and shown how that category can produce a new model.
The re-articulation of capitalist expansion and circulation are examples of what Robert Kurz describes as the necessary “ontological break” that will proceed any successful transition out of capitalism. In a 2005 article, he argues that contemporary Left movements are constituted by “regressive ideas that seek to reverse the movement of the wheel of history” (364). We would not be wrong to classify Collis and his desire to “return” to the commons as a member of the regressive Left. That said, the continuity between the breakdown of physical boundaries in capitalism and the one that would be necessary for any global resistance movement points to something new, and something that I would argue *We Are Nothing* achieves. Circulation, in the post-revolutionary world of *We Are Nothing*, is ontologically distinct from circulation under capitalism: rather than functioning as a technology by which commodities realize their value, it is a technology by which both objects and individuals find use. That is, in the present, circulation is designed to valorize surplus value; in the future of *We Are Nothing*, it is designed to valorize use value. As such, *We Are Nothing* answers the mournful conclusion to Jameson’s *Valences of the Dialectic*. There, he writes:

> Utopia as the absolute negation of that fully realized Absolute which our own system has attained cannot now be imagined as lying ahead of us in historical time as an evolutionary or even a revolutionary possibility… It would be best, perhaps, to think of an alternate world—better to say the alternate world, our alternate world—as one contiguous with ours but without any connection or access to it. Then, from time to time, like a diseased eyeball in which disturbing flashes of light are perceived or like those baroque sunbursts in which rays from another world suddenly break into this one, we are reminded that Utopia exists and that other systems, other spaces, are still possible. (612)

What Bernes demonstrates is that “our alternate world,” as made visible on the surface of the lyric poem, is, in fact, continuous, rather than contiguous, with the present. Or, as Bernes writes early in *We Are Nothing*:

> no other world is possible except all of them (6)
Notes to Coda

1 The “smooth ‘pricing surface’” calls to mind Christopher Nealon’s recent article on Dana Ward’s Crisis of Infinite Worlds. On Nealon’s account, Ward constellates a number of images of smooth surfaces to produce a dialectical arrangement between the figures of infinity and humanism. As the speaker of Ward’s poem runs his finger across one of these surfaces, looking for some textural indication of boundaries, Nealon writes, “he’s wanting to find a crack in the world that by way of enclosure separates us and pits us against each other. But the opposition isn’t between the mere human world and the vaster universe that teaches us humility by ignoring us; it’s between the quality of paradise in the world that is and the hints of paradise in the world that might be” (60). That is, the imperceptible difference between surfaces is a figure for the difference between our present world and utopia.

2 There are, to date, four books in the project: To the Barricades, which (as we shall see in more detail shortly) brings the history of the Paris Commune into the present; Anarchive, which deals with the Spanish Civil War; The Commons, which sets the enclosure movement in England against the return to the “commons” called for in contemporary Left politics; and Dispatches from the Occupation, a book of essays about his ongoing involvement in the Vancouver Occupy collective.
CITED LITERATURE


“Another Frightening Show About the Economy.” This American Life. NPR. 2 October 2008.


Smith, Caleb. “Williams’s Pastoral (“When I was younger”), *Explicator* 64:3 (Spring 2006): 157–159.


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EDUCATION
Ph.D., English, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL, 2016
M.A., Comparative Literature, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, 2006
B.A., Theatre, Kenyon College, Gambier, OH, 2001

DISSERTATION AND SPECIALIZATIONS


AWARDS & HONORS
2015 Travel award from UIC Graduate College

2013 UIC Shipley Award for Outstanding Graduate Essay, “We Are All Pound Now: the Cantos and the Shape of the Economy”

UIC Provost’s Award for Graduate Research

2012 UIC Kogan Bonus Award for Outstanding Prospectus

LANGUAGES
Reading knowledge of German, French, Latin, and Classical Greek.

PUBLICATIONS
Books
Poems of the American Empire: The Lyric Form in the Long Twentieth Century. Currently seeking publisher.

Edited Collections
Who’s Afraid of Totality?: The Trouble with the Trouble with Diversity. Volume of essays co-edited with Kevin Floyd.

Articles
2015 “The Way We Mean Now: On Susan Howe’s Poetics and Occupy Wall Street,” Textual Practice. (Forthcoming)
“The Dissonance Is Discovery: Marie Curie, Social Credit, and William Carlos Williams’s New Measure,” *The William Carlos Williams Review* 32.3 (Fall 2015)

2013


**Chapters in Books**

2014


**Special Issues**

2016


**Book Reviews**

2015


2009


**CONFERENCE ACTIVITY**

**Conferences Organized**

2015

“The Basement Tapes,” Marxist Literary Group’s Institute on Culture and Society, Washington DC, June 2015

**Panels Convened**

2016

“Who’s Afraid of Totality?: The Trouble with the Trouble with Diversity.” Organized with Kevin Floyd, MLA, Austin, TX, January 2016. Included in Presidential Theme.

“Political and Aesthetic Form,” Roundtable with Jennifer Ashton, Nicholas Brown, and Joshua Clover, UIC, October 2015.

**Invited Papers**

2015

2014  “Can Affective Criticism Read Material History in Literature?” MLA, Chicago, IL, January 2014.

Selected Conference Presentations


2014  “Williams’s Dialectics from In the American Grain to Paterson,” Marxist Literary Group’s Institute on Culture and Society, Banff, June 2014.


“‘This then That’ or That This: Narrativity, Lyric Poetry, and Anti-capitalist Aesthetics,” NeMLA, Boston, MA, March 2013.


TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Illinois Institute of Art
  Gen Ed 101: College Writing (Fall 2015, Winter 2016)

University of Illinois at Chicago
  American Literature Survey (Fall 2010, Fall 2012, Summer 2013)
  Introduction to Academic Writing I and II (Spring 2009, Fall 2009, Fall 2012, Spring 2013)
  English and American Poetry (Spring 2010, Fall 2011)
  Film and Culture (Summer 2010)

University of Oregon
  Introduction to Comparative Literature I, II, & III (Fall 2006–Spring 2007, TA)
  Scandinavian Cinema (Spring 2006, TA)
  German Cinema (Winter 2006, TA)

EDITORIAL WORK

2013–present  Editorial Manager, Mediations (online)
  • Work collaboratively with submitting authors, editorial board, and peer reviewers to see submissions through from submission to publication.
  • Typset and code issues for publication.

Managing Editor, MCM’ Publishing (online and print)
• Work with authors and editorial board through all stages of manuscript development.
• Typset and code texts for online and print publication.
• Manage marketing for each publication.

UNIVERSITY SERVICE
2013–2015  Steering Committee Member, Graduate Employees’ Organization
2014       Committee Member, University of Illinois Presidential Search Committee
2013       Founding Member, English Graduate Student Association
2009–2010  Assistant Director, First-Year Writing Program

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS
Modern Language Association
American Comparative Literature Association
Marxist Literary Group