

**ON OCCASION:  
AMERICAN POETRY AT THE MARGINS OF THE WAGE, 1865-1973**

by  
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## ABSTRACT

“On Occasion: American Poetry at the Margins of the Wage, 1865-1973” shows how poets writing in the U.S. from the mid-nineteenth century to today have reimagined the poetic occasion—the real or imagined event that sanctions the poet to write a poem and that sets the parameters for genre and tone. Dominant histories of Western poetry suggest that the rise of the modern lyric emptied out and secularized poetry’s occasions, transforming poetry’s public events into narrow scenes of subjective experience. Against this view, I show that even as the rise of “the lyric” devalues “occasional verse,” poets not only continue to think with an expansive sense of poetry’s occasionality, they also link it in new ways to the historical movements of American capitalism. In chapters on Walt Whitman, Jean Toomer, James Schuyler, and June Jordan, I describe a discontinuous pattern in which poets reconceive the occasion as recurring, systemic, and social in response to the ongoing, crisis-ridden reproduction of capitalist social relations. In particular, these poets each link the occasion to a sense of American capitalism’s internal unevenness, both geographical and developmental, seen through the manifold relations of marginality to the wage—of un-, under-, or informal employment. Writing with an eye on dramatic movements in the re-composition of the labor pool—Emancipation, the Great Migration, deindustrialization—these poets attune the poetic occasion to the unfinished business of capitalist subsumption in the U.S. In doing so, they adapt longstanding histories of poetic genre to the struggles, determinations, and possibilities of life under capital, articulating new ways of seeing relations between poetry and history, economic and artistic value, human suffering and consolation.

**Primary Reader and Advisor:** Christopher Nealon

**Secondary Reader:** Jared Hickman

**External Reviewers:** Ronald G. Walters; Samuel Chambers; Derek Schilling

## DEDICATION

*for Nora L. Bredes (1950-2011)*

Who first taught me what poetry is,  
and who always insisted on reading my first drafts.

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## CONTENTS

Abstract . . . . .	ii
Dedication . . . . .	iii
Acknowledgements . . . . .	iv
List of Tables . . . . .	vii
List of Figures . . . . .	vii
Introduction: Poetry, Capital, and the Shape of the Occasion . . . . .	1
1. “Not the Abstract Question of Democracy”: The Social Ground of Whitman’s “Lilacs” . . . . .	31
2. The Adequacy of Jean Toomer’s <i>Cane</i> : Mixed Form and Uneven Development . . . . .	64
3. Suburban Likenesses: James Schuyler’s Poetics of Getting By . . . . .	99
4. “Poor Rich America”: The Country and the City in the Work of June Jordan	136
Bibliography . . . . .	187
Vita . . . . .	198

## LIST OF TABLES

1. Percentage share of total employment, U.S. 1820-2003 . . . . .	19
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## LIST OF FIGURES

1. Fairfield Porter, <i>The Screen Porch</i> (1964) .....	109
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## INTRODUCTION

### POETRY, CAPITAL, AND THE SHAPE OF THE OCCASION

This dissertation describes how U.S. poets across the long twentieth century have rethought the poetic occasion in order to register, formalize, and apprehend unfolding contradictions and contingencies of life under capital. As a term of poetic significance, *the occasion* has long been side-lined in scholarship on modern poetics as a vestigial remnant of pre-modern verse. Associated with the ritual contexts of prayer, dedication, and public rhetoric—epideictic speech, in short—the occasion names the real or imagined event that sanctions the poet to write a poem and that sets the parameters for form, address, and tone. From the singing contests of classical Greece, to the coterie rivalries of Elizabethan England, to the lively competitions of the expanding print marketplace, everything from major public events to private moments of individual loss have served as occasioning experiences for poets to write poems. Indeed, at many times and places, writing “occasional verse” itself has defined the social role of the poet as such. For poets and their audiences alike, *the occasion* serves as the actual or figural mediator through which genre meets circumstance. According to narratives of the development of the modern lyric, however, the all-encompassing abstraction of “the lyric,” has progressively sublimated older poetic genres, producing an ideal of the poem as needing no other occasion than reading itself. Accordingly, for one of the few scholars of occasional poetry in post-Classical poetics, the category was effectively killed by William Wordsworth, who definitively recast the occasion as an interior and subjective “mental event.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Dolan, *The Poetic Occasion from Milton to Wordsworth* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 104.

“On Occasion” argues that rather than killing off the occasion, poets have continuously reconfigured it. In the chapters that follow, I demonstrate how U.S. poets active from the mid-nineteenth century to today—including Walt Whitman, Jean Toomer, James Schuyler, and June Jordan—have continued to think and write with a sense of poetry’s occasionality. Rather than identifying the occasion with public events of state, however, or with the opaque personal events in the life of the poet, the poets in my study tie the occasion to the uneven rhythms of development and crisis characteristic of American capitalism. Responding, in particular, to dramatic movements in the character and composition of the American labor pool—from Emancipation to the Great Migration to deindustrialization—these poets come to reimagine the occasion as social and recurring rather than singular and punctual. This shift in the relationship between poetic occasionality and history prompts them in turn to revise and remix an array of generic combinations, writing nocturnal elegies to grasp changing articulations between work and race, for instance (Chapter 1), or pastoral epistles that can coordinate rhythms of social and personal precarity (Chapter 3). The poems that result, I find, alter our understandings of poetic consolation, the temporalities of struggle, artistic autonomy, and solidarity in the American capitalist lifeworld. In doing so, they promise to shift broader debates in historical poetics and the politics of poetry.

## 1. BEYOND LYRIC SUBSUMPTION: GENRE, OCCASION, AND HISTORICAL POETICS

Scholarship on Anglo-American poetry and poetics over the last decade has been to a significant extent preoccupied with debates over the history, status, and boundaries of a single category—“the lyric.”<sup>2</sup> Emerging out of what seem increasingly to be the last gasps of the Poetry

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<sup>2</sup> The dueling monuments to this trend are *The Lyric Theory Reader*, ed. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2014); and Jonathan Culler, *The Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2015).

Wars—with its fractious debates about form and the poetic subject—and the marked opening of poetry scholarship to non-literary verse cultures under the heading of “historical poetics,” the New Lyric Studies has stamped the field with a deep-seated suspicion of “the lyric” as a real or natural poetic object.

In their influential studies of Dickinson and the Victorian reception of Sappho, Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, respectively, seek to describe both the power and the groundlessness of “the lyric” as a genre.<sup>3</sup> By painstakingly reconstructing the material facts of poetic editing, translation, publishing, and circulation in their respective contexts, Jackson and Prins begin to trace a genealogy of “the lyric” across the nineteenth century as an idealized yet increasingly persuasive readerly fiction. Far from an original member of the supposedly natural Aristotelian triad (epic, lyric, drama), “the lyric,” Jackson and Prins show, had to be invented by modern editors, tastemakers, and critics, each wrestling in different ways with the ever-deepening pressures of the post-Enlightenment world. More recently, Jackson and Prins’s collaboration in *The Lyric Theory Reader* collects a wide range of Anglo-American poetics scholarship since the early twentieth century in order to show how that nineteenth-century ideal became a twentieth-century critical project—what they call “lyricization”: “Thus what began in the nineteenth century as an aspiration became in the twentieth century a real genre—indeed, became not only the genre to which poetry aspired but the genre so identified with poetry that poetry became another name for it.”<sup>4</sup> With this account, Jackson and Prins mean to show how literary critics have come to elevate a constructed category—“the lyric”—as a timeless and quasi-natural aesthetic value which subsumes and then renders invisible the wide world of pre-Romantic verse genres. Where once verse culture meant a

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<sup>3</sup> See Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999); and Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Jackson and Prins, “Introduction,” in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, 7, 4.

heterogenous range of forms, readers, audiences, and genres, by the mid-twentieth century “the lyric” had come to subsume those particulars under the flattened, ideally literary frame of “poetry,” confined primarily to the college classroom.

The force of these arguments lies not only in the claim that the lyric has a genealogy, however, or that this genealogy’s chief protagonists are professional literary critics. Jackson and Prins go farther by arguing that the process of lyricization has made it actually impossible to see anything *but* lyric. “The lyric” functions at an epistemic level, in other words, as the poetic expression of an air-tight, secularized modernity; at this late date, there is no outside or alternative to “lyric reading.” Thus, Jackson’s study of Dickinson develops an explicitly melancholic reading practice that traces the violent construction of Dickinson’s corpus as “lyric” while mourning the irretrievable possibility of knowing her poems otherwise. Further, formalist and multiculturalist critiques of “the lyric” as an autonomous and self-enclosed hermeneutic whole can only validate the lyric’s own self-understanding, reproducing its own logics in the form of anti-lyric critique. The history of “lyric reading” that Jackson and Prins describe thereby calls only for more lyric reading, or for developing a rigorous and self-recursive textual historicism whose proper operation becomes slowing down and describing the reification of “the lyric” in action, all while keeping an eye out for the textual remainders of what has been left behind.

Although only implicit in Jackson and Prins’s account, a key casualty of the lyric’s rise would be the sense of occasion that has traditionally accompanied poetic genres as their *raison d’être*. Indeed, one could track the lyricization of poetics discourse just by following the fortunes of the occasion.<sup>5</sup> As late (or early) as Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics, it’s still possible to mourn the apparent lack of value placed on occasional poetry. By the time Warren and Brooks write their

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<sup>5</sup> See Marian Zwerling Sugano, *The Poetics of the Occasion: Mallarmé and the Poetry of Circumstance* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992), 1-20, for a useful outline of one such story.

field-defining textbook, *Understanding Poetry* (1938), the occasionality of Andrew Marvell’s “An Horatian Ode” must be jettisoned altogether so that the poem can appear properly as a poem, just as its odic form must be read around in order for the poem to be read as lyric. In one of the only extended treatments of the occasion in modern poetics scholarship, John Dolan narrates a version of this story whose protagonists are poets themselves. Dolan describes a sea-change in the funereal occasion in the wake of the English Civil War, whereby shifting relations of patronage and internal problems in the logic of elegy lead poets to internalize the occasion. By the time Wordsworth comes along, Dolan argues, it’s all but inevitable that the actual corpse of elegy should disappear and that the occasion itself should migrate into the register of “mental events.”<sup>6</sup> Although it predates the most polemical versions of the lyric studies debate by a few years, Dolan’s account of the occasion in seventeenth- and eighteenth- century British verse corroborates the basic frame of Jackson and Prins’s lyricization narrative. One way to understand how poetry becomes modern—which is also to say, how the supposed particularity of “elegy,” for instance, becomes the universal “lyric”—is by dissolving the linked categories of genre and the poetic occasion through their internalization in the all-encompassing purview of the lyric speaker.

“Lyricization” thereby reframes a familiar plot in our stories about modernity, be they phrased in terms of religion—where secularization casts modernity through a series of increasingly abstract sublimations of belief—or, before that, capitalism—where increasing rationalization drives the inevitable expansion of market logics and commodity-fetishism. Common to these accounts is a narrative of decline routed through a trajectory of increasing subsumption, of the concrete by the abstract, the particular by the universal. Described variously by Jackson and Prins as an “invention,” a “project,” an “idealization,” and above all an “abstraction,” “the lyric” comes to

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<sup>6</sup> Dolan, 5.

stand in precisely for this narrative trope of an irreversible fall from variety and plenitude.<sup>7</sup> Out of the wide world of verse genres—most of them hardly even literary—the Enlightenment begins to winnow a series of possibilities—lyric, epic, dramatic—that the post-Enlightenment then completes by making universal: there is literature and then there is everything else. Where before there were songbooks, ballads, drinking-songs, odes, elegies, and the various occasions associated with them, now there is only “poetry” and the singular occasion of “lyric reading” that underwrites it.

This dissertation tells a different story. Unlike many of “the new lyric studies” key detractors, however, neither am I interested in shoring up “the lyric” as a viable tradition or real ontological feature of what people have called poetry for thousands of years. Rather, by admitting the historicity of “the lyric” without accepting the double-bind of “lyricization” as modernity, I want to suggest that tracking the fortunes of the “the lyric” might not be the best way of reading poetic history at all.

In order to grasp this point, we need to turn a critical eye to the narrative structure underlying the argument that “the lyric” has subsumed particular historical genres. For while professional readers and critics may have taught themselves how to see “lyric” above all else, the actual, divergent records of Anglo-American poetry offer powerful evidence that we have not, in the meantime, become *more lyric*. Rather, poets have continued to write sonnets, odes, elegies, aubades, nocturnes, and so on.<sup>8</sup> What’s more, they have done so not (at least not primarily) out of a desperate cleaving to some Arnoldian “tradition,” but as a means of enactment and response to the occasions produced by the contradictions of capitalist history. Or so I hope to show.

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<sup>7</sup> Jackson and Prins, 2; 8; 5.

<sup>8</sup> For an alternative picture of poetry reading in modern America than Jackson and Prins’s, which gives wider latitude for seeing both the continuity and heterogeneity of “verse culture” in the U.S. reaching into the present, see Joan Shelley Rubin, *Songs of Ourselves: The Uses of Poetry in America* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007).

To do so, I turn to an alternative understanding of “subsumption” drawn from Marxist conversations around history, development, and imperialism. In Marxist studies, “subsumption” names a process by which previously non-capitalist forms of production are brought into the orbit of capital. Crucially, however, that process is internally dynamic, open-ended, and uneven. In an unpublished manuscript planned for the end of *Capital*, Volume I, entitled “Results of the Immediate Process of Production,” Marx distinguishes between “formal” and “real” subsumption. Formal subsumption refers to the action by which capital takes over and directs a labor process “as it finds it,” subordinating without qualitatively transforming it. Formal subsumption, Marx writes, is “when a peasant who has always produced enough for his needs becomes a day labourer working for a farmer; when the hierarchic order of guild production vanishes making way for the straight-forward distinction between the capitalist and the wage-labourers he employs; when the former slave-owner engages his former slaves as paid workers, e.g.[.]”<sup>9</sup> In such scenarios, the actual labor process—the organization and technical composition of production—changes very little; it is merely “subsumed” into the abstract requirements of capitalist valorization. By the same token, accumulation can only proceed through extensive development, or the pursuit of absolute surplus-value by way of the physical expansion of production, the intensification of work, or the stretching out of the working day. A labor process is said to be “really” subsumed under capital, on the other hand, when competition drives capitalists to pursue the intensive, recurring transformation of the labor process itself, or the production of relative surplus value through the introduction of labor-saving technology. Real subsumption manifests in the large-scale productive forms of the factory system. It thereby expresses “*the specific mode of capitalist production*,” in which labor appears

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<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 1021; 1020.

immediately and fully in its socially abstract quality as value producing labor, rather than in its concrete particularity here and there submitted to the direction of capital.<sup>10</sup>

In the categories of formal and real subsumption, Marx's investigation into capital's fundamental abstractions—value, labor, the commodity—begins to express itself in more concrete analytic and historical relationships. Through them, the properly historical dimensions of categories like abstract and concrete labor, relative and absolute surplus value begin to unfold within a critical framework capable of grasping the distinctive rhythms of capital's historical epoch. Formal subsumption, Marx argues, is the “general form of every capitalist process of production” that is both logically and historically precedent to the “*the specifically capitalist mode of production*” characterized by real subsumption: “one form always precedes the other, although the second form, the more highly developed one, can provide the foundations for the introduction of the first in new branches of industry.”<sup>11</sup> Capital as self-valorizing value, expressed in the war-like relations of inter-capitalist competition, compels an expansionary drive that manifests both in the taking to hand of the old and the revolutionary production of the new.

The logic of precedence in the relationship between formal and real subsumption has at times led to its own declensionary periodization narratives.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Marx's “Results” manuscript gained widespread circulation in Western Europe only in the 1960s and 1970s, where it met a rising student movement and mass rank-and-file dissatisfaction galvanized by the shortcomings of “industrial society.” Postwar capitalism, it has been widely argued, is characterized by the full achievement of real subsumption across every level of economic and non-economic life, as more and more of people's needs and desires enter the abstracting churn of commodification. On the

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<sup>10</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 1037.

<sup>11</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 1025.

<sup>12</sup> See “The History of Subsumption,” *Endnotes* 2, <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/2/en/endnotes-the-history-of-subsumption>.



other hand, scholars and activists engaged in debates around global transition, development, and peasantries have turned to this corner of Marx's work precisely for a way out of both Soviet and Western Marxist ideas about stages and linear paths.<sup>13</sup>

In his theoretical reconstruction of a non-Western tradition of Marxian critique, for instance, Harry Harootunian insists that there is no logical or historical reason that a relationship of formal subsumption should inevitably transform into a relationship of real subsumption.<sup>14</sup> Instead, Marx's characterization of formal and real subsumption as the "general" and "specific" forms of the capitalist labor process, respectively, suggest that capitalism is comprised by the ongoing co-constitution and antagonism of different productive forms, rather than by a trajectory of progress from less to more to completely capitalist, or from pre-capitalist to capitalist (to socialist). In this view, the dynamic of historical development under capital must be understood as "uneven and combined": as a combination of different modes of production ordered by distinctive rhythms of labor, oppression, and struggle unevenly arrayed across scales of spatial relation, all related within an unfinished totality. The "modernity" of the factory and the commodity-form thereby require not only the seizure but also the ongoing reproduction of populations and labor processes outside of the capitalist value relation. Intensive development in one place (high wages, high productivity) requires extensive development somewhere else (low or no wages, high exploitation), whether around the corner or around the world. Spatialized elsewhere, in the colony, nature, or the domestic sphere, and rendered temporally distant—"backward" or "pre"-modern—the law of

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<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Verso Books, 2018); Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (London: Haymarket Books, 2011); and, more recently, the essays collected in "Agrarian Marxism," Michael Levien, Michael Wats and Yan Hairong, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45:5-6 (2018): 853-83.

<sup>14</sup> See Harry Harootunian, *Marx After Marx: History and Time in the Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2015).

value's constitutive "outsides" actually striate capitalism as a necessarily dislocated and multi-temporal yet totalizing lifeworld.

If such distinctions seem far from the problem of lyric poetry as Jackson and Prins present it, consider that for many of its banner theorists, "the lyric" has been important precisely as a way of naming what capitalist modernity has *not* otherwise subsumed. Theodor Adorno's scattered writings on lyric poetry, for instance, taught a generation of Anglo-American critics that "the lyric's" obstinacy in the face of modern instrumental reason offered a redoubt for properly critical thought, which was otherwise hounded by the spreading reach of the commodity-form. For Adorno, living—or so he understood things—beyond the end of capital's antagonisms, in a period of completed real subsumption, the lyric poem famously became "the philosophical sundial [. . .] of history," a passive time-keeper read by the philosopher given new lease on life after history had "miscarried."<sup>15</sup> Adorno's example, in other words, is one in which "lyric reading" emerges not only as corollary to the marginalization of verse cultures, but also as part of an effort to compensate for the vicissitudes of capitalist history, as a literary means for thinking about capitalist value and the foreclosures on revolutionary potential following the rise of "state capitalism."<sup>16</sup> In this respect, we can better account for Adorno's idea of "the lyric" when we see it not as the endpoint in a history of inevitable decline (more abstraction), but as a tool taken up within an immanent understanding of capital in the twentieth century—albeit one we need not share. This suggests, too, that "the lyric" functions in part as a shorthand for a story it can't consistently name—about the real subsumption

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<sup>15</sup> Theodor Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society," in *Notes to Literature I* (New York: Columbia UP 1991), 46; *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), 3.

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Pollock, "State Capitalism: Its Possibilities and Limitations," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1990), 71-95. On the historical blindspot in Pollock's understanding of twentieth-century capitalism—endemic to most strands of "traditional Marxism"—see Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996).

of life under capital. Between Adorno and Jackson, one could say, “lyric reading” moves from the negation to the symptom of the same forces.

If attention to the combined unevenness of capitalist history allows us to see more clearly its violent contingency—its ping-ponging from crisis to crisis in search of new bases of accumulation—it also gives us a new way to think about the literature produced across that history. One way to see this is to follow the poets’ lead: in exploring the contemporary purchase of historical genres such as elegy, ode, verse epistle, and more, the poets in this study treat poetic form as bearing its own kind of unevenness, one which proved useful for naming and giving shape to the unevenness they experienced in history and their own day to day lives. I follow suit by approaching genres as inherited repertoires of poetic enactment, apprehension, and response bearing within them long but non-determinate histories of prior usage.<sup>17</sup> Older (in some cases much older) than capital, they live on in ways that can be read heuristically as “residual.” Indeed, what Harootunian says of the formally subsumed relations of non- or pre-capitalist life under capitalism could be said as well about the enduring histories of poetic genre: “[N]ot ‘remnants,’ as such, but rather . . . historical temporal forms no longer bound to the moment and context in which they had originated, now acting in a different historical environment.”<sup>18</sup> In place of the implicit homology between “lyric” and “modernity” installed by the “lyricization” narrative, then, I submit a looser analogy between social and poetic forms calibrated—but never aligned—by the itinerary of the capitalist value-relation. The poets in this study make occasions out of the movements of combined and uneven development in the U.S. by retooling and remixing

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<sup>17</sup> I take impetus on this front from mostly unrelated conversations among Marxist genre theorists, Medievalists, and Classicists, the last two of which, by necessity in many cases, work with a more sophisticated understanding of poetic genre than much scholarly work on modern poetry. See for instance, Ralph Cohen, “History and Genre,” *New Literary History* 17.2 (1986): 203-18; John Frow, *Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Gregory Nagy, “Genre and Occasion,” *Mètis: Anthropologie des mondes grecs anciens* 9-10 (1994): 11-25; and the essays collected in *Matrices of Genre: Authors, Canons, and Society*, ed. Mary Depew and Dirk Obbink (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Harootunian, 11.

longstanding poetic genres. In doing so, they improvise poetic shapes that are internally non-synchronous in ways that give them considerable grip on capital's own dynamics of spatial and temporal combination.

Thus, the poets in this study stretch the presumed immediacy of the poetic occasion—its implicit here-and-now-ness—by using it to consider social and historical experiences determined through their relation to far-flung times and places. Whitman's postbellum writing, for instance, revises the most recognizable occasional genre in modern poetry—the elegy—in light of the broad social crisis of the Civil War, expanding the occasion of Lincoln's death to include a meditation on the contradiction between expanding white “free soil” farming and expanding the slave economy. Fifty years later, in order to capture the unevenness manifest in the Great Migration, Toomer's *Cane* alternates between verse and prose: neither the wage-intensive North nor the residually agrarian South allows for the realization of black humanity, Toomer feels, and so *Cane* offers a mixed form in which no one poem or short narrative—no one occasion of racialized experience—can make meaning out of racism on its own. Then, as the “golden age of capitalism” definitively winds down across the late 1960s, I show how James Schuyler meets a later moment of spatial and class recomposition that reads almost like the inverse of Toomer's: contradictions in a more technically developed American capitalism redirect both capital and labor back toward the countryside, albeit one organized not around the farm but the subdivision, and driven not by the black sharecropper but the white middle-manager. Jordan, finally, turns the occasion of the 1964 Harlem Riots into an opportunity to imagine the possibility for autonomous reverse migration to the countryside, an idea which first takes shape poetically in a series of Roman love elegies. In the work of these poets, the mix of distinctly present occasions with the deep temporality of poetic genre allows them—strikingly—to think across uneven social geographies, from farm to plantation, farm to city, city to suburb, and city to hinterland. This is in part because the movements of value

are totalizing: the spatial asymmetries created across regions and between city and country are also expressed in distinct rhythms of social production and reproduction determined not least by the prevailing level of technical development. The result is a poetic “contemporaneous non-contemporaneity” oriented by and toward the experience of combined unevenness under capital.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. THE MARGINS OF THE WAGE

Conversations around formal subsumption and uneven and combined development have largely taken shape through debates about the global character of capital’s emergence and systemic reproduction. Similarly, their most visible recent impact in literary studies has been to revitalize a materialist approach to world literature.<sup>20</sup> This dissertation takes a different tack, aiming to demonstrate the utility of these concepts within a diachronic overview of a single economic and literary formation—the U.S. from the mid-nineteenth to the late twentieth century (albeit with one prominent gap, to be discussed in a moment). In the long historical purview of this study, then, unevenness appears not only in spatiotemporal terms—in the developmental contrast between the Northeast and the Deep South, for instance, or in the rise of the suburbs—but also in the mix of human relations to value and the wage variously enforced by capitalist social reproduction.

That approach has its roots in the closing chapters of *Capital*, volume 1, and especially in Marx’s discussion of “the general law of capitalist accumulation.” There, Marx considers how the logic and process of capitalist accumulation generate “a law of population peculiar to the capitalist

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<sup>19</sup> Harootunian, 16. The phrase is Harootunian’s, but he attributes it to Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui, in a conceptual rhyme with Ernst Bloch.

<sup>20</sup> See Warwick Research Collective (WReC), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, ed. Stephen Shapiro et al. (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2015). WReC make a somewhat familiar case for the exceptionalism of the novel as the aesthetic form of modernity par excellence. Without wanting to counterclaim the superiority of poetry, I would suggest that readings in poetic genre offer considerable traction for thinking through combined and uneven development, not because lyric poetry formalizes the bourgeois subject of capitalist history, but because of the very non-synchronicity between poetic genre and history.

mode of production.” That law can be expressed in its simple form as one of increasing magnitude—that the “[a]ccumulation of capital is . . . the multiplication of the proletariat.”<sup>21</sup> That is, because labor-power functions as an aspect of capital itself—its “variable” component—the fact that capital must expand in order to survive implies in turn the growth of those populations dependent on selling labor-power for their own survival. At the same time, however, the law of value drives a tendentially rising relative share of constant capital in production—materials such as tools and machines—as capitalists compete to stay in business by cutting costs.<sup>22</sup> The absolute growth in the working population is thereby gradually accompanied by a diminishing relative demand for living labor in production. Just as the course of accumulation drives up the surplus portion of labor in production, then, so does it produce a “relative surplus” of people, or an “industrial reserve army of labor,” a population with no reserves yet at the same time in excess of capital’s own requirements.<sup>23</sup> For Marx, this is the crux of capital’s peculiar social logic, through which accumulation and increasing immiseration are necessarily conjoined: “The working population therefore produces both the accumulation of capital and the means by which it is itself made relatively superfluous; and it does this to an extent which is always increasing.”<sup>24</sup>

Tracing the historical action of this rhythm across the pages that follow leads Marx to narrate the recomposition of the British working classes around the wage, including the transformation of housing, diet, and livelihood across the variegated geographies of the British Isles. That narrative closes with the related underdevelopment of the Irish countryside and the

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<sup>21</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 784, 764.

<sup>22</sup> This, in itself, comprises what Marx describes in the *Grundrisse* as “the moving contradiction” of capital, “[in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth. Hence it diminishes labour time in the necessary form so as to increase it in the superfluous form; hence posits the superfluous in growing measure as a condition—question of life or death—for the necessary” *Grundrisse* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 706

<sup>23</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 782.

<sup>24</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 783.

quasi-racialization of the Irish peasantry within an uneven global division of labor: “The accumulation of the Irish in America keeps pace with the accumulation of rents in Ireland. The Irishman, banished by the sheep and the ox, re-appears on the other side of the ocean as a Fenian. And there a young but gigantic republic rises, more and more threateningly, to face the old queen of the waves: *Acerba fata Romanos agunt / Scelusque fraternae necis* [A cruel fate torments the Romans, and the crime of fratricide; from Horace’s Epode VII].”<sup>25</sup> First expelled from production in Britain by the course of accumulation, Irish proletarians are then recomposed under the sign of the ethnic other as a ready-made labor force to feed the growth of industrial capital in the U.S., Britain’s expanding frenemy across the Atlantic. In this movement, we get a characteristic glimpse of capitalist totality itself in motion across distinct yet interrelated scales: the ongoing historical process of subsumption into the wage, manifest unevenly across both space and social strata, expresses itself in a developmental tendency toward a twinned rising productivity/declining profitability at the center of accumulation (England) that unfolds through both recurring cycles of boom and bust and a secular slowdown, resolvable only through the ongoing transfer of surplus (first of labor, then of capital) to another center of production (America), where accumulation can restart on an expanded basis. This latter movement is, by some accounts, the story of the long twentieth century, seen here at its very dawning with the help of Horace’s seventh Epode, whose occasion lilts over the centuries from imperial decadence to global inter-capitalist competition.<sup>26</sup>

Tellingly, however, Marx’s work in volume 1 does not end here. Having shown how the law of value produces a corresponding “law of population,” Marx famously turns in the final part of the volume to social laws and dynamics *outside* of the capitalist value relation—that is, to the

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<sup>25</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 870.

<sup>26</sup> See Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994).

records of “so-called primitive accumulation,” “written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.”<sup>27</sup> “The discovery of gold and silver in America,” Marx writes, “the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production.”<sup>28</sup> Later critics from Rosa Luxemburg to David Harvey and recent proponents of “racial capitalism” have made the important corrective that such means of “accumulation by dispossession” do not fade with capitalism’s historical dawn.<sup>29</sup> Rather, they remain a necessary tool for responding to crisis and arranging the unevenness of both growth and subjection under capital. In terms of the axis of volume 1’s closing argument, however, we can say that it is only through the unfolding logic of accumulation that the historical *and ongoing* function of coloniality becomes legible.<sup>30</sup> By the same token, any critique of capitalist social relations which fails to account for what appear to be value’s putative “outsides” can only ever be incomplete. Historically prior (as in necessary) yet analytically posterior to capital’s own laws of population, the violent expropriation of the serfs and the apocalyptic adventures of European colonialism are properly understood as inextricably intertwined with the itinerary of industrial capital. The concepts of surplus population and so-called primitive accumulation thereby give further concreteness to the historical logics of real and formal subsumption.

Which is all to say that capital as a totalizing social form in Marx is distinctive for the way it separates people from the necessary means of subsistence, creating heterogeneous relations of

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<sup>27</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 875.

<sup>28</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 915.

<sup>29</sup> See David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (New York: Oxford UP, 2003). On racial capitalism, see Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

<sup>30</sup> See Joshua Clover, “Fanon: Absorption and Coloniality,” *College Literature: A Journal of Critical Literary Studies* 45.1 (2018): 39-44.



market dependency mediated by money but variously enforced by direct or indirect violence. Indeed, as later traditions of feminist, black, and anticolonial Marxism have consistently argued, the industrial wage is constituted through its relation not only to capital, but also to indirectly waged and un-waged forms of exploitation and oppression. Scholars of slavery, sharecropping, and peasant labor, for instance, have demonstrated the historical and logical indifference of capital to the particular relations of production so long as profitability can be maintained.<sup>31</sup> Thus, market-dependent plantation owners in the American South could rely on non-market-dependent direct producers (enslaved Africans) without worrying that, because they had paid for their labor-power upfront rather than piece-meal, the commodities produced by their enslaved work-force would not earn them recognition as share-holders in the total social capital. Similarly, as the tradition of Marxist feminism has made clear, much feminized reproductive labor is necessarily excluded from value as its very condition of existence: unpayable wages for housework provide an invisible foundation of stolen time upon which the very possibility for exploiting labor-power is based.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, the keenest observers of capitalist production in its more technologically developed forms—its really subsumed forms—have persuasively shown the ways in which automation, or the increasing technicity of capital, leads not to an ever expanding ontology of value—now based in so-called immaterial labor, for instance—but to heightened rates of exploitation in other parts of the economy, especially low-wage service work, as well as to growing surplus populations.<sup>33</sup> In all these

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<sup>31</sup> See Vladimir I. Lenin, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1956); W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1993); Banaji, 45-95, among many others.

<sup>32</sup> See Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004); Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Social Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*, trans. Hilary Creek, ed. Jim Fleming (New York: Autonomedia, 1995); and Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975).

<sup>33</sup> See George Caffentzis, *In Letters of Blood and Fire: Work, Machines, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (New York: PM Press, 2013); Aaron Benanav, “Crisis in the Class Relation,” *Endnotes* 2, <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/2/en/endnotes-crisis-in-the-class-relation>; “Automation and the Future of Work—1,” *New Left Review* 119 (2019): 5-39; and Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2018).

ways, wage-labor appears as the specific expression of a larger set of relations to value and to capital that are only negatively or indirectly mediated by the wage itself. As Michael Denning puts it: “[P]roletarian’ is not a synonym for ‘wage labourer’ but for dispossession, expropriation and radical dependence on the market. You don’t need a job to be a proletarian: wageless life, not wage labour, is the starting point in understanding the free market.”<sup>34</sup>

This broadly heterodox Marxism empowers me to tell a story about U.S. capitalism oriented not only by its contingency and spatial heterogeneity, but also by its reliance on unevenly distributed intensities of exploitation, oppression, and direct violence at the margins of the wage. That story picks up with the “young gigantic republic[’s] rise[],” glimpsed at the end of Marx’s chapter on the general law, and closes with the early movements of capital’s long downturn, indexed by the economic shock-year of 1973. On either side of the American Century, I track the composition and recomposition of the labor pool at three moments of dramatic change—the Civil War/Reconstruction (Chapter 1), the first wave of the Great Migration (Chapter 2), and deindustrialization (Chapters 3 and 4). Following recent conversations among historians of slavery and capitalism, Chapter 1 reads the Civil War as punctuating a broader crisis of social reproduction precipitated by the competition and entanglement among the different social forms of plantation slavery, industrial capital, and petty commodity production, each of which required the guarantee of geographic expansion, albeit for different reasons. Out of that conflict, the stage was set for the expansion westward of capitalist agriculture and wage-dependency, driven by debt, direct expropriation, and genocide. Chapter 2 turns to the interwar period introduced by the cataclysmic events of the Red Summer and the early stirrings of the Great Migration. Pushed by a postwar crisis in agriculture—and the attendant changes in regimes of white terrorism—and pulled

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Denning, “Wageless Life,” *New Left Review* 66.4 (2010): 81.

by the increasing concentration of northern industry, southern black migrants manifested a large latent surplus population for the new capitalist enterprises of American growth. Indeed, by 1925, unskilled labor decisively overtook skilled labor in the U.S., with a higher proportion of black Americans working for a wage than white Americans.<sup>35</sup> As wage labor both on and—more and more gradually—off the farm expanded, it came to remap race in terms of differential access, skill, and exposure to both labor discipline and state violence.

If Chapters 1 and 2 cover periods of dramatic expansion in the wage precipitated by the shift from agriculture to industry, Chapters 3 and 4 compass the early signs of fraying in capital’s golden age, marked by both the generalized force of the wage in American life (with fewer and fewer ways to survive without one) and the thinning out of its security (its narrowing and polarized accessibility based on race, citizenship, and gender). Chapter 3 deals with the shifting spatial locus of capital from the urban core to the expanding suburbs through the growing prominence, and vulnerability, of white-collar service work in the emergent reality of capital’s long downturn. Chapter 4 is shaped by the second wave of the Great Migration. The definitive end of what historian Aaron Benanav calls “nitrogen capitalism” pushed millions more out of agriculture at the same time as industry was beginning to leave American cities, precipitating an “urban crisis” that was actually a fundamental crisis in the wage relation itself, borne principally by black communities.<sup>36</sup> No longer able to absorb surplus labor in the ways it had earlier in the century, American capital stamped superfluity with the sign of racialized exposure to state control.

Table 1. Percentage share of total employment, U.S. 1820-2003

Agriculture,	Industry	Services
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<sup>35</sup> See Jacqueline Jones, *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor* (New York: Norton, 1998), 311-320; 334.

<sup>36</sup> Aaron Benanav, “Automation and the Future of Work—2,” *New Left Review* 120 (Nov/Dec 2019): 117-46.

	forestry, and fishery		
1820	70.0	15.0	15.0
1870	50.0	24.4	25.6
1890	38.3	23.9	37.8
1913	27.5	29.7	42.8
1929	21.1	29.4	49.5
1938	17.9	31.2	50.9
1950	12.9	33.6	53.5
1973	4.1	31.2	64.7
1990	2.8	25.7	71.5
2003	2.0	20.0	78.0

Source: Angus Maddison, *Contours of the World Economy 1-2030: Essays in Macro-Economic History* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), Appendix B-1, page 384.

Spanning these episodes, meanwhile, though rarely on view within any given chapter, is a larger historical retrospective of the U.S.-centered cycle of accumulation, from systemic expansion to downturn. That overarching narrative is visible at a glance in the basic statistical composition of the labor pool from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries (Table 1). The headline changes here are familiar but nonetheless worth noting: as the share of agricultural employment falls, from 50 percent to 25 between 1870 and 1920 and then to 4 percent by 1973, the share of industrial employment increases to a plateau around 1950 and then declines, as services expand to over two-thirds of the formal workforce. The rough and ready figures of GDP growth largely track the expansion and stabilization of industrial production around the mid-twentieth century (with a significant lull in the 30s), realizing higher than average growth with the expanding base of industrial production before entering a long slowdown from 1973 to today. While such

movements have been described in terms of a natural evolutionary path—from modernity to postmodernity, say—or as the result of key policy initiatives innovated by elites—liberalism and neoliberalism—this dissertation sees in them the contradictory unfolding of capitalist accumulation.<sup>37</sup> Today, that course has cul-de-sac’d in a period of so-called secular stagnation, characterized by persistently low growth in output, productivity, and wages, on the one hand, and a growing reliance on financialized debt services to transfer imagined future growth into present profits for the few, however fictitious.<sup>38</sup> Absent real expansion, debt-driven paper growth throws patchy cover for a system increasingly composed of low-wage and informal service work, both nationally and across the globe.<sup>39</sup> By some accounts, indeed, informal economies in the U.S. may take in as much as 40% of the labor force, a figure bound only to increase over the course of the present contraction.<sup>40</sup> From the vantage of contemporary experience, a historically significant, yet only sporadically appreciated experience of American capitalism comes into view, one shaped less by exploitation than by the experience of marginality to value and the systemic contradiction by which the ongoing accumulation of surplus value becomes also the accumulation of surplus humanity.

Notably absent from the middle of this long narrative arc is the high-water moment for both American capital and the organized labor movement in the decade following the Second World War, when profits, productivity, and wages found themselves rising in a virtuous cycle underwritten by a dollar-denominated confluence between capitalist centralization and geopolitical

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<sup>37</sup> See Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945-2005* (London: Verso, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> See Annie McClanahan, *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First-Culture* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2017), 1-18.

<sup>39</sup> See Louis Hyman, *Temp: The Real Story of What Happened to Your Salary, Benefits, and Job Security* (New York: Penguin, 2018), for a recent historical account of the rise of flexible white-collar labor in the U.S.

<sup>40</sup> See Demetra Smith Nightingale and Stephen A. Wandner, “Informal and Nonstandard Employment in the United States: Implications for Low-Income Working Families,” The Urban Institute Brief 20, August 2011, <https://www.urban.org/>; and Anat Bracha and Mary A. Burke, “Who Counts as Employed? Informal Work, Employment Status, and Labor Market Slack,” Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Working Papers, No. 16-29, <http://www.bostonfed.org/>

stability.<sup>41</sup> In part so as to bring the manifold unevenness of American capital into sharper relief, I have found it useful to read around this very period of midcentury consolidation—of full employment, Taylorism, and the family wage—even if that consolidation was itself uneven. As an analytic focal point, in other words, “the margins of the wage” here are at once a political economic descriptor and a periodization device. Seen from the constantly shifting edges of its own recognition, American capitalism looks less like a smooth developmental ladder toward self-sustaining modernity than a ceaselessly experimental and crisis-ridden path of valorization contingent on the disposability of human life—its constant conscription into and ejection from production—within ever-shifting racial and gendered divisions of labor.

### 3. AMERICAN POETRY AND THE LABOR POOL

But that’s all in retrospect. In order to begin to tell the poetic history that I argue tracks these changes, we need to move into the messiness of real time. For even as the poets across this study come up with ways of following the changes they are living through—to the possibilities for livelihood and human development facing themselves and those they care about—none of them makes recourse to the language of Marxian political economy laid out above. Nevertheless, the mediations between poetry and the movements of capitalist history described here are less byzantine than one might expect. Typically construed in Romantic critiques of value as an icon for un-alienated labor, poetry-writing under American capital might be seen more generatively as an un- or at best semi-waged social activity.<sup>42</sup> If the drift of American economic development entails a complicated dance in which exploitation itself is often necessarily foreclosed to many, the porous

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<sup>41</sup> For a detailed account, see *The Golden Age of Capitalism: Reinterpreting the Postwar Experience*, ed. Stephen A. Marglin and Juliet B. Schor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

<sup>42</sup> For an ambitious and far-reaching investigation of artistic production vis-à-vis capitalist value, see Dave Beech, *Art and Value: Art’s Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics* (London: Haymarket Books, 2016).

boundaries among formality and informality, unemployment, under-employment, and superfluity that describe the margins of the wage actually locate fairly well a common social position for the American poet.<sup>43</sup> Occasional poetry, meanwhile, has been one name for the poet's bread and butter in worlds where writing poems very rarely grants one access to the means of survival. Long an index of poetry's social value, in other words, it's not altogether surprising that the occasion in twentieth-century American poetry should get rewritten to be *about* the conditions of survival themselves under the rule of capitalist value. If capital takes "the near to hand" and retools it as needed in struggles over profitability and accumulation, poets too reach "near to hand"—to the resources of poetic history—in the efforts to write poems adequate to the social forces shaping their lives and contemporary reality.

In light of the seasoned irony of Marx's Horace, for instance, it's worth remembering that the U.S. turns to face the "old queen across the waves" in part with its own repurposed classical figure—one more earnest in tone, perhaps, thanks to the unfamiliar weight of its new world-historical mantle. In one of the most enduring examples of public poetry in American culture, that is, Emma Lazarus's 1883 sonnet, "The New Colossus," renders occasional the incoming tide of cheap labor inputs that will help launch the U.S.'s hegemonic career.<sup>44</sup> The story about how that particular poem—just one among many commissioned by backers as fundraising material—came to permanently adorn the statue is circuitous. Suffice it to say here that it is not one about how a sonnet became a lyric, but about how a relatively novel historical force—the mass absorptive capacity of American industry—became an occasion. However banal, this example helps to indicate

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<sup>43</sup> On the aestheticization of work and the workification (not to say commodification) of art, see Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2015); and Jasper Bernes *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2017).

<sup>44</sup> This connection struck me in Clover's reference to the poem in a talk considering similar political economic forces; Clover, "Marx After Literature," "After Post-Marxism" Conference, University of California, Berkeley, 13 December 2019.

what I hope to show is an abiding concern in modern American poetic history. In conversation with recent scholarship by Kevis Goodman, Margaret Ronda, and Jasper Bernes, which has stressed the relationship between poetry and the activities of labor, this dissertation examines the relationship between poetry and the labor pool.<sup>45</sup>

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My dissertation joins a growing body of reenergized humanist study guided by Marx's critique of value, much of which has been focused around poetry in particular.<sup>46</sup> I believe the long, discontinuous poetic history sketched in what follows will not only further demonstrate the importance of historical-materialist method to literary study, but also speak to the ways in which poetry has served to orient its readers and writers to the dialectical movements of the value-relation, including not least the long, heterogeneous records of struggle against it.

A different version of this project could have followed the example offered by "The New Colossus" and worked to recover records of occasional writing in the deep archives of twentieth-century popular verse and public poetry. While I decided rather early to focus my research on the fate of the occasion in more recognizably "literary" poetry, this project owes much to the study of twentieth-century verse culture and its relationship to left politics, subcultures, and everyday use.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008); Bernes; Margaret Ronda, "'Work and Wait Unwearying': Dunbar's Georgics," *PMLA* 127.4: 863-78; and *Poetry and Work*, ed. Jo Lindsay Walton and Ed Luker (London: Palgrave, 2019).

<sup>46</sup> See, for instance, Chris Nealon, *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011); Nealon and Clover, "Literary and Economic Value," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (July 2017), <https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-123>; Ruth Jennison, *The Zukofsky Era: Modernity, Margins, and the Avant-Garde* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2012); Margaret Ronda, *Remainders: American Poetry at Nature's End* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2018); and *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, 3 vol., ed. Beverley Best, Werner Bonefeld, and Chris O'Kane (Los Angeles: SAGE Reference, 2018).

<sup>47</sup> See, among others, Cary Nelson, *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Al Filreis, *Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties, and Literary Radicalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1994); Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material*



By bracketing the midcentury Pax Americana, I am also bracketing the transition from modernism to postmodernism and the consolidation of “the lyric” in its various academic, confessional, and avant-gardist stripes. My hope is that, in winning some distance from anxieties around “the lyric” in poetry typically read under its sign, the readings that follow will show how tracking the artistic mediation of capitalist value can open more ways of reading across our received boundaries of aesthetic value.

I am equally hopeful that this study can contribute to the work of carving a path out of the charged binaries between form and content installed across the Poetry Wars.<sup>48</sup> Coeval with the reception of French poststructuralism in the academy, intra-poetic and inter-movement debates about how to write political poetry have helped produce a blinkered “politics of form” that over and over again pitches class against identity in the least productive ways. Some of the most exciting work in African American and Asian American poetry and poetics has strongly countered such legacies by exposing the racial blindspots in American discourses of the avant-garde and recovering the formal innovativeness of poetry once typically deemed legible only for its quality as testimony.<sup>49</sup> Anxious that such approaches risk re-ionizing the same zero sum logics they critique, I aim to show how reading for occasion in light of the material reproduction of domination under capital can expand our sense of what kinds of poetry might suit our critical mappings of the present. This approach is inspired not least by the example of June Jordan, who sought to develop a kind of tactical poetics of response that needn’t accept the tradeoffs between politics and form, protest and

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*World* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997); and Nadia Nurhussein, *Rhetorics of Literacy: The Cultivation of American Dialect Poetry* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2013).

<sup>48</sup> See especially Timothy Kreiner, “The Long Downturn and its Discontents: Language Writing and the New Left” (PhD dissertation, University of California, Davis, 2013); and Kreiner and Christopher Chen, “The Politics of Form and Poetics of Identity in Postwar American Poetry,” in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Economics* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>49</sup> See for instance Dorothy J. Wang, *Thinking its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford UP 2014); and Anthony Reed, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2014).

affirmation, Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston. In collating black and white poets under the same historical rubric, meanwhile, I aim not to dissolve but to sharpen our sense of the ways American poetry and racialization are intertwined.

While my focus on the domestic relations of U.S. poetry and the internal dynamics of U.S. capitalism are seemingly distant from the recent groundswell of work on comparative and transnational poetics, I believe there are useful connections to be drawn between this research agenda and the present study. My interest in describing the combined and uneven character of capitalist development in America and the persistence of other-than-lyric genres is guided in part by a sense that a deeper materialist understanding of the delicacy and contingency of American hegemony can ease pressures around American exceptionalism and open up more room for comparatist reading.<sup>50</sup> An organic expansion of the argument here, which has begun to guide further reading in Francophone poetry, would link the heuristically closed internal dynamics of the labor pool in the U.S. to global divisions of labor across the decolonizing world.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, the occasional coordination between poetic genre and capitalist unevenness in the poetry across this dissertation forces important revisions to conventional understandings of the relationship between poetry and time. A prominent and influential strand of lyric reading, inaugurated by Sharon Cameron's groundbreaking book, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (1979), has held that "the lyric" is uniquely suited to problems of mortality and eternity. "Lyric" for Cameron names that order of forms which struggle against life's essentially tragic phenomenality in an effort to reverse time's ravaging passage. At its strongest tilt, this argument has

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<sup>50</sup> See Jahann Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009); Harris Feinsod, *The Poetry of the Americas: From Good Neighbors to Countercultures* (New York: Oxford UP, 2017); and Walt Hunter, *Forms of a World: Contemporary Poetry and the Making of Globalization* (New York: Fordham UP, 2019).

<sup>51</sup> In an argument resonant to this one, Natalie Melas reads Aimé Césaire's *Cahier du retour au pays natal* as a poem written to the long—indeed unfinished—occasion of decolonization; see Melas, "Poetry's Circumstance and Racial Time: Aimé Césaire, 1935-1945," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 115.3 (2016): 469-93.

inspired a kind of tragic ontology of poetry as a linguistic medium circumscribed by the phenomenality of any given poem.<sup>52</sup> In sharp distinction to these arguments, the poetry in this dissertation uses the built-up resources of different genres to approach the polyrhythmic temporalities of capitalist social life. Less concerned with the mortality of individual persons and poems, Whitman, Toomer, Schuyler, and Jordan each in their own ways uses the timeliness implied by the occasion to try and grasp the multiple temporalities of social metabolism under capital. This leads them to both take up and repurpose the poetic lineaments of apocalyptic time threaded through the histories of occasional genres like elegy and aubade. As the immediacy of the occasion itself gets rerouted through the mediation of distant times and places, I find the poets in this study weaving rhythms of punctuality and temporal flux in an effort not so much to defeat time as to be momentarily equal to its unevenness under capital. The occasion introduces the risk that a poem might miss its time and place, or might lose its value as its occasion fades, a basic structure that accounts for much anxiety about occasional poetry in both Romantic and post-Romantic aesthetics. The poets in this study are interesting because they see this risk less as a threat than as an incitement to imagine how poems might meet their moment if that moment itself is understood not to be ephemeral or timeless but layered, historical, and politically contested.

Chapter 1, “‘Not the Abstract Question of Democracy’: The Social Ground of Whitman’s ‘Lilacs,’” considers the work of Walt Whitman, whose richly complex sense of occasion has been obscured by a dominant critical focus on his importance to forming American versions of concepts like “self,” “lyric,” and “democracy.” In the context of American projects of Manifest Destiny, Whitman’s handling of these concepts comes to seem self-certain, even triumphant. In contrast to

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<sup>52</sup> See, for instance, Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Oren Izenberg, *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011); Michael Clune, *Writing Against Time* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2013); and Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 2016).

this lasting impression, I argue that during the Secession Crisis and Reconstruction, Whitman develops the figure of “vista” to describe political struggles of uncertain outcome. I retrace how Whitman’s writing from the 1840s and 50s adopted the framework of “free soil,” which opposed slave expansion not for abolitionist reasons, but because of a worry that expanding slave territory might limit opportunities for independent white landholding. I argue, however, that the social crisis of the Civil War confronted Whitman with the increasing wage-dependency of white agrarian labor, leading him to focus more on the problem of what he called “social and economic organization” than on the “abstract question of democracy.” I show how Whitman’s “Memories of President Lincoln” cluster builds up a complex sense of poetic occasion by moving across genre, from elegy and ballad to lament and epitaph. I conclude that this dynamic is epitomized in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” where Whitman rewrites the script of pastoral elegy in the mode of the nocturne: I argue that the elliptical rhythms of the “Evening Star” offer Whitman a way around the messianism of elegy and the limited ideals of “free soil” alike, providing him a figural language that can approach the deepening postbellum problem of the expansion of waged labor from the perspective of contemporary history’s painful open-endedness.

Chapter 2, “The Adequacy of Jean Toomer’s *Cane*: Mixed Form and Uneven Development,” begins by situating Jean Toomer’s frequently anthologized poem “Song of the Son” in the antiracist print circuits of *The Crisis*. The publication of this poem, I argue, announced Toomer as a poet through its engagement with the occasion of the Great Migration, focalized in the genre of the lynching poem. Whereas Whitman in the 1860s worried over what inclusion into the bounds of the wage meant for white agrarian producers, Toomer in the 1920s faces the racializing violence wrought by its geographical unevenness. Striving to think together the residually agrarian yet increasingly mechanized world of the South with the wage-intensive labor markets of the North, neither of which could offer black Americans safety or the promise of human

flourishing, Toomer turns to the alternation of genres in *Cane*. Read as a kind of *prosimetrum* (that is, a work of alternating verse and prose), *Cane* uses the movement between verse and prose to assume a series of different stances—anecdotal, historicist, mystical—toward an open-ended interval of social transformation in which relations of freedom and unfreedom were palpably entangled. Clarifying *Cane*'s shape as *prosimetrum* allows me to offer a series of correctives to debates about *Cane*'s genre: not quite elegiac, since the text is not mourning anything, nor nostalgic, since the history it's concerned with is actual, nor novelistic, as it has often been read, *Cane* becomes legible as a work of alternating "prose and poetry adequate to the expression of [its] reality," as Toomer put it himself in a letter to Countee Cullen.

My third chapter, "Suburban Likenesses: James Schuyler's Poetics of Getting By," argues that in his poetry from the 60s and 70s, James Schuyler turns a characteristic middle style focused on description toward the material possibilities for reproducing artistic coterie at an arm's distance from capitalist value. In what we now think of as the opening decade of a protracted downturn in American capitalism, when the imperative to valorize met sharpening inter-capitalist competition over the maintenance of profit levels, Schuyler turns moments of poetic transformation outside of the wage—of seemingly homogenous daily flux into pockets of meaningful time, for instance—into occasions for grasping itineraries of economic value as they reshape the social world around him. Thus, in major poems such as "Dining out with Doug and Frank" and the long "Morning of the Poem," I argue, Schuyler expands small-scale social occasions—a dinner out, a letter to a friend—until they touch capital's crisis-driven restructuring of urban space. "Dining Out," for instance, uses patterns of elegy to connect semi-waged poetic work to the immediacy of bodily sustenance and, ultimately, speculative capital flows: "Now it's tomorrow, / as usual. Turned out that / Doug (Douglas Crase, the poet) / had to work (he makes his bread / writing speeches): thirty pages / explaining why Eastman Kodak's / semi-slump (?) is just what / the stockholders ordered."

“Morning of the Poem,” on the other hand, directly compares “the poem,” or “the truth, the absolute of feeling,” to “a house for sale,” carving out an interval between purchase and sale in which the house-sitting, unwaged poet can turn the shifting disparities between city and suburb into the pleasures of poetic form.

For the young June Jordan, an out-of-work single parent active in radical Civil Rights organizing across New York City, a commission from *Esquire* in 1965 to write an essay about the event of the 1964 Harlem Riots was a crucial lifeline. She promptly transformed the project from an essay about the events themselves into a collaborative research project with Buckminster Fuller that focused on the systematic under-development of Harlem and the possibility of rebuilding the neighborhood as a kind of positive feedback loop of non-gridded open space and self-sufficient skyrises. Beginning with this episode, my final chapter, “‘Poor Rich America’: The Country and the City in the Work of June Jordan,” traces the evolution of Jordan’s thinking about architecture and social space as it migrates from the urban history of slums to the economic histories of industrial agriculture and racialized surplus populations. Steeped in archival materials around Jordan’s entirely forgotten second novel, which she tried to have published for over two decades, about an integrated rural commune in Rulleville, Mississippi, I recover Jordan’s abiding interest in radical land reform across the 1970s. This allows me to offer a clearer narrative than we have had of Jordan’s early career as it takes off from the *Esquire* commission. In particular, I show how Jordan’s evolving work on the urban crisis eventually turns into a critique of the differential relation between the city and the countryside organized by capitalist development, which she thinks in terms of “automation” and increasing superfluity. This leads her to a radical vision of a black-led exodus from the city—and the relations of capitalist value—together, and to a poetics of revolutionary desire accessed through the fossilized genre of the Roman love elegy.

Out of the Hundred Years just ending (1776–1876), with their genesis of inevitable willful events, and new introductions, and many unprecedented things of war and peace, (to be realized better, perhaps only realized, at the remove of another Century hence)—Out of that stretch of time, and especially out of the immediately preceding Twenty-Five Years, (1850–1875,) with all their rapid changes, innovations, and audacious movements—and bearing their own inevitable willful birth-marks—my Poems too have found genesis.

—Walt Whitman

## CHAPTER 1

### “NOT THE ABSTRACT QUESTION OF DEMOCRACY”: THE SOCIAL GROUND OF WHITMAN’S “LILACS”

Published at the midpoint of the so-called Long Depression of 1873–79, Whitman’s preface to *Two Rivulets* (1876) registers the poet’s growing anxiety over American economic development. As Whitman scholarship has long emphasized, that anxiety corresponded with an increasingly promissory discourse of democracy. While the 1876 preface is rightly notable for its optimism about the post-Civil War Union—“This Union is only now and henceforth . . . to enter on its full Democratic career”—the closing sentences above articulate nested temporalities that include but do not reduce to a justified national itinerary.<sup>1</sup> Whitman marks the centenary of independence with a set of novel social features whose meanings only the future will determine. More, he characterizes the more immediate twenty-five-year span of his own career by referencing several equivocal phenomena unanchored to a national or statist narrative at all. The Civil War, meanwhile, seemingly functions as a black hole—unnarratable but warping the years surrounding it. Writing from his vantage within the first truly global capitalist crisis, Whitman’s more familiar claims about his poetry’s prospective readership shift slightly: if he still cedes his proper audience—

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<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman, preface to *Two Rivulets*, in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 1008; hereafter cited parenthetically as *CP*.

now much like democracy itself—to the future, he also squarely brackets his actual poems in an extensive present structured not by democratic universality but by novel forces of social transformation and antagonism.

While Whitman's historical aspirations grow increasingly elongated in late-in-life formulations such as his centennial-era preface, he notably continues to insist that his poetry parallels a discrete historical interval, albeit one conditioned not so much by democracy as by the transformations in American social and material life. In the draft of a speech included in *Specimen Days* (1882), Whitman clarifies those forces further in terms of the prevailing relations of "social and economic organization": "Beneath the whole political world, what presses and perplexes to-day, sending vastest results affecting the future, is not the abstract question of democracy, but of social and economic organization, the treatment of working-people by employers, and all that goes along with it—not only the wages-payment part, but a certain spirit and principle, to vivify anew these relations" (*CP*, 1064).<sup>2</sup> Incited by such moments of demurral from the "abstract question of democracy," this chapter joins Whitman in seeing his poetry as concerned with the evolving relations of "social and economic organization" across the nineteenth century's latter half, or as immanent to the consolidation of American capitalism. In particular, I argue that Whitman's post-Civil War elegy, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (1865), formalizes not an assured national future—as it generally gets read—but an uncertain crisis period pivotal to the reorganization of American social life around the capitalist wage. Taking a cue from Whitman, I argue that

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<sup>2</sup> Written for a lecture Whitman never gave, such an articulation marks a significant development in his long-held understanding of labor as that which "creates real wealth . . . [to which] man owes every thing possessed of changeable value" (Whitman, *The Journalism*, ed. Herbert Bergman, Douglas A. Noverr, and Edward J. Recchia, vol. 1, 1834-1846 [New York: Peter Lang, 1998], 197), quoted in M. Wynn Thomas, "Labor and Laborers," in *A Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Donald D. Kummings (London: Blackwell, 2005), 60. Whitman's writing in "The Tramp and Strike Questions" also, of course, dramatically contradicts his many other, better remembered pronouncements on the world-historical centrality of "the abstract question of democracy" and America's importance for it.



“Lilacs” understands its occasion not just as Lincoln’s assassination, or the war itself, but as the very conditions that produced these events.

Whitman’s poem thinks about those conditions in decidedly poetic—which is also to say mediated—ways, by exploring the resources of a particular trope (vista) and a pair of overlapping genres (elegy and nocturne). Specifically, I hope to show that, in “Lilacs” and Whitman’s other postbellum writing, vista works not as absolute aeriality but as a provisional vantage over contemporary history’s contested terms. In *Democratic Vistas* (1871) and “Lilacs,” that shifting vantage helps reconfigure the affective ends of apocalyptic messianism. This poetics of vista is especially important to “Lilacs,” where it participates in several distinct poem-wide rhythms— affective, perspectival, and figural—that rewrite elegy’s script as a genre offering Christological consolation. Chief among those rhythms is the fluctuating horizontal itinerary of Venus, or “the Evening Star,” which displaces the sun’s singular rise and fall in “Lilacs” elegiac cosmography. Tracking “Lilacs” appeals to vista alongside its multivalent sense of timing illuminates how the poem modulates elegiac feeling within the nocturne’s looser poetic shape. By tuning elegy to Venus rather than the sun or moon, Whitman amplifies the nocturne’s modal coordinates to revise the Christian poetics of consolation. In so doing, he sketches a rendition of English-language elegy that might grasp changes in the shape of history rather than the prospect of history’s completion. Whitman’s positionality admittedly affects that effort. But his revision of elegy also touches the system-wide contradictions that drove the United States’ open-ended transformation—not so much into a world-historical exception as into a key player in an emergent, industrializing cycle of capitalist accumulation.

Although reading Whitman via a history of capitalism irreducible to the “abstract question of democracy” holds promise for reconsidering his poetry as a whole, I focus on “Lilacs” in particular because it implicitly thematizes the problem of thinking and feeling a historical inflection

point—which an exemplary death emblemizes—pivotal to that history itself, namely the Civil War. That four-year conflict violently punctuated the force of differing capitals’ contradictory needs in shaping American social life. The war also exposed with special clarity the racialized, gendered, and abled distinctions among independent, waged, and enslaved workers, and the tensions between a politics of labor and a politics of abolition within racialized capitalism. In “Lilacs,” this heady mix of social forces manifests across the poem’s imaginative geography, in landscapes of craftspeople’s homes, midwestern farms, and Southern swamps. But it also informs the poem’s elegiac itinerary as the latter moves through the contrastive interplay between tropes of vista and katabasis—the one offering prophetic vantage over social life, the other marking the edge of possible cross-racial solidarities. With its ambiguous occasion (is it Lincoln’s death, the Civil War’s end, the Union’s reconstitution, or an epoch’s closure?) and its revision of elegy’s apocalyptic calendar, “Lilacs” asks to be read less as a philosophical meditation on democratic universality than as a poetic attempt to track the social and historical contradictions between distinct regional forms of social labor that shaped the sectional crisis and its resolution.

The interpretive shift from democracy to capital that I’m proposing here will require some further justification. In the next section, I trace recent emphatic clarifications in the historiography of American capitalism and the lead up to the Civil War while resituating Whitman’s political thinking in their light. The story of Whitman’s career typically sees him leaving the field of politics in order to pursue the vocation of Emerson’s American poet before eventually returning to matters of national concern as the Civil War intensifies. Thus, while Whitman’s early poetry—above all the 1855 masterpiece, “Song of Myself”—gives Emersonian transcendentalism a workaday free labor pungency, its democratic ideals are generally seen as being more philosophical than material; likewise, Whitman’s later concern with Lincoln and the “Union” tends to get viewed as either a deepening exploration of democratic universality or a symptomatic voicing of American

exceptionalism. I will insist instead that both Whitman's politics and his poetics mediate the particular unevenness of capitalist development in America, which came to a head in the Civil War and Reconstruction. Revisiting the 1871 essays collected as *Democratic Vistas*, I argue that vista functions there as a figure for grasping not America's democratic exceptionalism, but the emergent historical rhythms of American capitalism. Written some years ahead of those essays, "Lilacs" thinks through the genre of elegy to achieve similar effects. In its elliptical temporality, Whitmanian elegy tests a provisional shape in which momentary vistas might offer vantage over the uneven terrains of recent struggle in order to meet, however fleetingly, the pains of persistent historical violence, embodying a poetry that tries not to subsume but to remain adequate to the complexity of surrounding struggles. In this respect, whereas Whitman is traditionally viewed as giving to later poets a model of the American lyric "self," I suggest that a major part of his legacy is also an occasional approach to the long unfolding historical dynamics of capitalist development.

## 1. WHITMAN AND THE SECESSION CRISIS

A quick keyword search for "capitalism" in the digital Walt Whitman Archive returns a sparse eighteen bibliographic entries since 1900.<sup>3</sup> Hardly definitive, let alone scandalous or intrinsically motivating, this data point does quickly index one of Whitman studies' abiding categorical priorities. To more fully appreciate the openly stated contradictoriness of Whitman's poetry, however, I suggest we turn to a historiographic frame attuned to social contradiction itself. Thankfully, recent work by American historians such as Edward E. Baptist, Walter Johnson, and James P. Hudson, and by Marxist historiographers such as Charles Post and James Parisot has made it easier than it has been in the past to write American literary history from a materialist

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<sup>3</sup> Walt Whitman Archive, ed. Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, Center for Digital Research in the Humanities, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, accessed November 12, 2019, <https://whitmanarchive.org>.

vantage.<sup>4</sup> Ongoing research under the headings of “the history of capitalism” and the critique of settler colonialism has come to stress with renewed clarity both the mutually constitutive relationship between capitalism and white supremacy and the shaping roles played by everyday struggles over social and material life. In the context of the nineteenth century and Whitman studies, in particular, such scholarship has come to narrate the Civil War’s social origins in a way that resists stagist and democratic teleologies alike, enabling us to track how open-ended contradictions among different, overlapping forms of social labor (enslaved, market-dependent, wage-dependent) enter the mediations of poetic form. It can, indeed, help situate the contradictoriness of Whitman’s poetry within what the poet described as its proper circumference: the “material facts of [its] country and radius, with the coloring of the moods of humanity at the time, and its gloomy or hopeful prospects” (*CP*, 661).

In Whitman’s lifetime, the “material facts” of American life had come to be shaped more and more definitively by contradictions between the growth requirements of geographically distinct relations of (increasingly capitalist) social reproduction. By the mid-nineteenth century, longstanding struggles going back to the late eighteenth-century had largely recast Northern agriculture around production for a growing domestic market. Artisans, likewise, were actively fighting to maintain old privileges around the ownership of tools and control over prices as domestic industrial capital began to enter more forcefully into production. The interrelation between market-dependent farmers and industrial capitalists in the North contrasted with the mix

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<sup>4</sup> See Michael Zakim and Gary J. Kornblith, eds., *Capitalism Takes Command: The Social Transformation of Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2012); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2013); Edward E. Baptist, *Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Peter James Hudson, *Bankers and Empire: How Wall Street Colonized the Caribbean* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2017); Charles Post, *The American Road to Capitalism: Studies in Class-Structure, Economic Development, and Political Conflict, 1620-1877* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), and James Parisot, *How America Became Capitalist* (London: Pluto Press, 2019). For a critique of recent the “history of capitalism” focus for writing over and writing out the work of black radical historians, see Hudson, “The Racist Dawn of Capitalism: Unearthing the Economy of Bondage,” *Boston Review: A Political and Literary Forum*, 14 March 2016, <http://bostonreview.net>.

of subsistence farming and large-scale plantations in the Southern Cotton Kingdom, where capital's requirements were no less keenly felt, albeit differently so. Indeed, as Parisot among others—going back to W. E. B. DuBois and Marx—argue, cotton and sugar plantations were guided by their own particularly capitalist “laws of motion,” distinguished by the fact that slave owners paid for and capitalized the labor-power of enslaved workers over their entire lifespan (and even beyond, as they looked ahead to the value of future generations).<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that all of America by 1850 was “capitalist”—far from it; particularly on the ever-shifting frontier, settlement was still largely organized around small landholding. But over the course of the nineteenth century the needs of both Northern industrial capital and Southern plantation capital were coming increasingly to set the terms of American social and political life. Whitman's lifetime and, more narrowly, “the preceding Twenty-Five years” surveyed in his final preface, compass the transformation of the U.S. from “a *society with capitalism* [into] a *capitalist society*.”<sup>6</sup>

That transformation was far from inevitable. It passed through civil war not because of an inherent contradiction between a modern, capitalist North and a pre-modern, non-capitalist South, but because the distinctive relations of capitalist production prevailing in the North and the South both came to require the exclusive guarantee of expansion into the non-capitalist West. Because plantation capitalists owned their labor-power outright, they relied to a large extent on the production of absolute surplus value through the intensification of exploitation and the geographic expansion of production. Dependent on extensive development to drive productivity growth, slave owners required guaranteed geographical expansion tomorrow to anchor input costs and asset prices (land and slaves) today; simultaneously, the burgeoning domestic market that linked small

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<sup>5</sup> See Parisot, 114-120; Banaji, 60-70; and, most recently, John Clegg and Duncan Foley, “A Classical-Marxian Model of Antebellum Slavery,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 43.1 (January 2019): 107-38.

<sup>6</sup> Parisot, 2.

capitalist farmers in the rural North and budding industrialists in the urban East required the continued expansion of market-dependent landowning across the West. In Parisot's words, the secession crisis was "determined by competing pathways of [capitalist] imperialism": "Both the north and the south were driven by expansionary social forces. Small farmers desired land while land speculators, railroad companies, and slave planters pushed to increase space for profits."<sup>7</sup> The political breakdown of the 1840s and 50s over the character of western expansion, then, expressed the real needs of the parties involved grounded in their distinct relations of production and property owning. Thus, while neither independent landholders nor plantation owners faced imminent land shortages, the material compulsions structuring their respective social forms necessitated a go-for-broke pursuit of future expansion.<sup>8</sup> Civil war erupted as the unintended outcome of—and solution to—conflicting efforts by distinct class fragments to ensure their own reproduction—the efforts of slave owners to remain slave owners, factory owners to remain factory owners, and direct producers (enslaved peoples, waged and unwaged workers, family farmers) to survive and resist their differing realities of exploitation and expropriation. Central to those efforts, albeit in different ways, was the possibility of Western settler expansion.

Such struggles were visible (albeit in slanted ways) to historical actors on the ground. Consider this passage from *Debow's Review* by the Southern editorialist, former head of the U.S. Census, and early architect of the 1850 Compromise, J. D. B. Debow:

So long as it is the interest of the South to advance the money value of men, and the material interest of the North to depreciate such value, it will not be difficult to determine the line of policy that each will pursue. The South will strive to *enlarge*

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<sup>7</sup> Parisot, 161, 169

<sup>8</sup> Johnson shows in detail slave owners' concerns over the geographical limits to accumulation based on plantation slavery in the mid-nineteenth century. See Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 330-36.

*its boundaries*, because, where productive *land* is cheapest, *men* are most valuable. Those who represent the capitalists of the North will endeavor to *limit* and *circumscribe* these boundaries for opposite reasons. . . . Northern capital demands *cheap* labor, and one way or another will have it. Southern capital owns its labor, and demands for it a fair remuneration, and whatever guise the subject may assume, this is the real question at issue.<sup>9</sup>

However circumscribed by ideology, and despite all that hides in the staggeringly prosaic euphemism of “the money value of men,” Debow names the crux of the problem in the relative value of “free” or enslaved labor vis-à-vis the price of Western land. The “real question” of uneven development in North America—of distinct social property relations coming into competition over the possibility of their continuing reproduction—set the terms for the political and increasingly armed conflicts over Western settlement across the 1850s and 60s.

An unflinching Unionist, Whitman took positions on the social and political-economic terms of secession and Reconstruction that were famously equivocal: as an active member in the radical “free soil” movement of the late 1840s and early 1850s, Whitman vociferously opposed slavery’s expansion, though only as a means for preserving white labor’s access to land in the western territories. He was also a friend and fellow traveler to leading white abolitionist writers, especially later in his career. Likewise, holding more or less unreformed Jeffersonian ideals about independent craft production and having experienced life’s vicissitudes as a sporadically employed, semiskilled worker in New York, Whitman largely distrusted the concentration of capital that began taking off during and after the Civil War; at the same time, he maintained faith in both wage labor’s liberatory possibilities and the social importance of productive capital (and capitalists).

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<sup>9</sup> J. D. B. Debow, *Debow’s Review* 24 (Jan.-June 1858), 241-42.

These tensions in Whitman's politics never become anything like a coherent nationalist ideology in his poetics, whether progressive or oppressive—not least because the broader social antagonisms to which they responded remained unresolved. Rather, the difficulties Whitman's politics pose are writ large across his work in varying degrees of intensity. Their divergent pressures register the myriad ways Whitman lived contemporary social contradictions—not as the inevitable declension of a cultural logic of modernity (that is, democracy or America) or as the “irresistible course” of entrepreneurial capitalism, but in the ongoing struggles over the reproduction of social life increasingly mediated by relations to capitalist value.<sup>10</sup>

The Civil War transformed the conditions of such struggles. In addition to the many technological and logistical innovations Northern mobilization wrought, Union's victory effectively removed obstacles to the further development of the domestic market, thereby securing western expansion in terms favoring the accumulation of domestic industrial capital. As historians of Reconstruction have been detailing since DuBois, however, the bases for continued expansion kept having to be won, from wagedworkers organizing around an eight-hour workday; from freedmen organizing novel and autonomous social relations with and without the backing of Republican state governments; from Indigenous peoples fighting against displacement and ongoing genocide; and from increasingly radical reform movements committed, however fractiously, to universal suffrage, feminism, and antiracism.

Tuning our literary historical attention to the situated open-endedness of such struggles can help collate the otherwise often divergent strands of Whitman scholarship on race and labor. That work has tirelessly recovered the often ambivalent ways in which the thought of black bodies, and especially of black bodies at work, marks Whitman's writing through and through, sometimes

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas, *The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998), 179.



positively, sometimes negatively.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, for example, Whitman's journalism over the late 1840s and '50s expressly rejected slave expansion, not on abolitionist grounds but from a desire to expand westward the contractually free labor of white independent producers. On the other hand, the lightning bolt that was Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass* celebrated the laboring bodies of enslaved blacks, white wageworkers, and independent producers alike. The gap between these two positions haunts Whitman's poetry as much as it does Whitman criticism. Whitman's poetics of union/Union, his vaunting of free labor's dignity as the basis for an amative syntax of national fusion, encodes the racialized history of value—the history of what bodies count and how—to which his journalism so loudly belongs.

Ed Folsom traces precisely this distinction in poems that Whitman gradually revised to obscure markers of racial blackness—sometimes even in his poetic personae. Based on the evidence of such revisions, Folsom provocatively argues that Whitman's experience in Washington talking with black Union soldiers informed his depiction of the Civil War “battle-corpses” at the end of “Lilacs.” Instead of the objective description of decomposing bodies (which Whitman and his contemporaries elsewhere describe as yellowish or black), Folsom suggests that the “white” bodies in “Lilacs” signal a tacitly racialized poetic voice.<sup>12</sup> I will argue below that the swamp to which Whitman's persona in “Lilacs” flees in the poem's latter half marks another site in which the otherwise effaced history of race in America bodies forth in Whitman's poetry. I want to emphasize here, though, that the knot of racialization in Whitman's thinking, forged in the

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<sup>11</sup> See Martin Klammer, *Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence of “Leaves of Grass”* (University Park: Penn State UP, 1995); Luke Mancuso, *The Strange Sad War Revolving: Walt Whitman, Reconstruction, and the Emergence of Black Citizenship, 1865-1876* (Columbia: Camden House, 1997); and Ed Folsom, “Lucifer and Ethiopia: Whitman, Race, and Poetics before the Civil War and After,” in *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*, ed. David S. Reynolds (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 45-97; “Erasing Race: The Lost Black Presence in Whitman's Manuscripts,” in *Whitman Noir: Black America & the Good Gray Poet*, ed. Ivy G. Wilson (Iowa: U of Iowa P, 2014), 3-31, as well as Wilson's and Charles Freeburg's essays in the same volume.

<sup>12</sup> See Folsom, “Erasing Race,” 21-22.

violence of struggles over labor and land, belongs to a protracted crisis of social reproduction whose negotiation drove the emerging dominance of Northern industrial capital in the United States.

While Whitman and other free soil partisans imagined whitewashed prairies populated by independent producers, nascent industrial capital in the North required the growth of domestic markets for durable goods and, by extension, the growth of market-dependent direct producers. Both these tendencies conflicted with plantation slavery's needs, but they also came into increasing internal tension with each other. As small producers became further integrated into the domestic market (especially via debt), their expansion west undermined the very conditions of possibility for their continuing existence as a class. Reproducing a racially stratified labor force increasingly submitted to the wage, meanwhile, or defending whiteness as wage-worthiness per se, could mitigate the pressures of this self-undermining expansionary drive.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, both before and after the war, someone like Whitman could simultaneously recognize and misrecognize race's function as a lever of competition and distinction, at once upholding black humanity—confident that “whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for it”—and worrying over what open competition with nonwhite workers would do to white labor's price (*CP*, 123).<sup>14</sup> Straddling the painful divisions of the capitalist value-relation but unable to see them as such, the fitful, polyvocal turns in Whitman's aspirations for democracy and Union instantiate his on-the-ground

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<sup>13</sup> See David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso Books, 1991); and Nikhil Pal Singh, “On Race, Violence, and So-Called Primitive Accumulation,” *Social Text* 34.3 (November 2016): 27-51.

<sup>14</sup> As Du Bois puts it, in the decades before the Civil War, “the white laborers realized that Negroes were part of a group of millions of workers who were slaves by law, and whose competition kept white labor out of the work of the South and threatened its wages and stability in the North. When now the labor question moved West, and became a part of the land question, the competition of black men became of increased importance. Foreign laborers saw more clearly than most Americans the tremendous significance of free land in abundance. . . . But here on this free land, they met not only a few free Negro workers, but the threat of a mass of slaves. The attitude of the West toward Negroes, therefore, became sterner than that of the East. Here was the possibility of direct competition with slaves, and the absorption of Western land into the slave system. This must be resisted at all costs” (DuBois, *Black Reconstruction*, 19).

response to the unevenness of social and material life crystallized by the secession crisis. Those aspirations offer a “mental ‘road-map’ to the highly contradictory reality of . . . lived social relations,” even as they fail to grasp its total shape.<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that Whitman’s poetry *doesn’t* articulate a certain logic of American imperial ambition caught up with defining a nation’s contours, as some scholars argue; it is to say, however, that this logic might be more productively understood as an immanent and improvisatory solution to actual social contradictions rather than as a transhistorical ideology of American exceptionalism, not least because the Civil War itself manifested a historically particular contradiction between two competing models of capitalist empire.

This distinction allows us to recognize capitalism’s (and empire’s) political—rather than inevitable—origins and development in North America. In turn, instead of diagnosing how the divergent space-times of Whitman’s poetry manifest an underlying (or overarching) cultural logic of American democracy or exceptionalism, the work of Parisot and others empowers us to ask how Whitman apprehended the contradictory shapes of lived struggle around him through poetic resources both given and improvised. Vista, I’ll argue next, names one such resource—even a privileged one, given its dramatization of historical perspective. It would serve Whitman as a trope for reckoning with the feel of contemporary history shaped increasingly by the expanding reach of capital and wage dependency. Concurrently, vista bears the “inevitable . . . birth-marks” of Whitman’s position within that present, and especially of the equivocal tangent he occupies between a politics of labor and a politics of abolition (*CP*, 1008). In the next section, I revisit this trope in his 1871 essay collection, *Democratic Vistas*. By moving from vista to a rereading of “Lilacs” informed by it, I hope to lay the groundwork for appreciating how Whitman analogizes

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<sup>15</sup> Post, 64.

elegy's conventional rhythms of mourning and consolation to the occasion of uneven development in crisis.

## 2. PROVISIONAL ENDS: WHITMAN'S POETICS OF VISTA

The term *vista* has long been central to our understanding of Whitman's poetics. In *Democratic Vistas*—a text that often serves as exhibit A in both critiques of and apologies for Whitman's Americanism—it appears as a figure for Whitman's visionary annunciation of the American democratic promise: “Far, far, indeed, stretch in distance, our Vistas! How much is still to be disentangled, freed! How long it takes to make this American world see that it is, in itself, the final authority and reliance.”<sup>16</sup> Many commentators have noted the uncertain tenor of *Democratic Vistas*' otherwise exhortative voice.<sup>17</sup> That tonal complexity manifests itself here in Whitman's remarkably agile shuttling between triumphalism and critique. In this early invocation of “our Vistas,” Whitman reaches toward the possibility of substantive freedom imagined as being coextensive with the emergence of an “American world.” At the same time, that “world” immediately recedes toward both an inaccessible interior (the “in itself” of collective spirit) and a horizon bleeding over the edges of time and space (“Far, far, indeed”).

This effect largely characterizes Whitman's vistas across the essays of 1868–71 as a whole. They typically emerge through unwinding descriptions of “democracy,” or “America,” “in silence, biding its time,” only to recede from the horizon into the contradictions of the present—that, for instance, the same “democratic spirit” might house both the promise of universal suffrage and the “canker'd, crude, superstitious, and rotten” logic of the profit motive, or of “materialistic

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<sup>16</sup> Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas: The Original Edition in Facsimile*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2010), 33; hereafter cited parenthetically as *DV*.

<sup>17</sup> See for instance Richard Chase, *Walt Whitman Reconsidered* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1955); Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman: The Political Poet* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989), 246–60; and Mancuso, *Strange Sad War*, 51–77.

advancement” (*DV*, 32, 11). Or, as in the sentences above, vistas announce new “worlds” only to see them dissolve, crossed by the perpetual hopefulness and nagging doubt over the realization of a “final authority” able to resolve America’s democratic promise.

Vista for Whitman, then, functions as a provisional figure. It wins a vulnerable, short-lived assurance only by making sense of a crowded middle ground. It also offers a figure for historical perspective, for a height that can make sense of the past and project the future without abstracting from the open processes (and pains) of historical becoming, “stain’d” as they are “with much blood, and mark’d by savage reactionary clamors and demands” (*DV*, 16). Whitman’s figure of the vista takes shape as a fleeting, synthetic perspective that emerges fitfully through an effort to track the contradictions of his present. The uncertain tones of these expansive-recessive visions legibly mediate a social reality whose divergent yet overlapping rhythms of reproduction had become increasingly palpable as the very content of struggle.

Given its connections with prophetic vision and with the potential consolation of a synthetic resolution, Whitmanian vista also often opens onto an apocalyptic imaginary grounded in Judeo-Christian messianism. Take this passage, more or less halfway through the essay sequence, as Whitman tries to account for the tonal and aspirational disharmony at his project’s core: “And maybe we, these days, have, too, our own reward. . . . Though not for us the joy of entering at the last the conquered city—not ours the chance ever to see with our own eyes the peerless power and splendid *éclat* of the democratic principle, arrived at meridian, filling the world with effulgence and majesty far beyond those of past history’s kings, or all dynastic sway—there is yet, to whoever is eligible among us, the prophetic vision, the joy of being tossed in the brave turmoil of these times” (*DV*, 34). Here, Whitman apprehends the present’s fullness (“these days”; “these times”) before simultaneously nominating and foreclosing a fulfilled future envisioned and then cordoned off as “not for us.”

In formulating this tense discord, Whitman deploys both a messianism of exile and eventual return (from and to place, nation, “conquered city”) and a Christological messianism of temporal fulfillment and retrospective redemption, figured in the punctual moment of the eclipse, with history itself “arrived at meridian.” Yet Whitman also suspends these two visions under a negative syntax—they are “not ours.” Indeed, he only offers the actual “reward” to those living through “these days” after this negative visionary digression. And that reward is simply the capacity for vision itself, or, as Whitman immediately qualifies, the “joy” of living through the undecided struggles of a present seen from its own perspective rather than from that of a justified future. In this regard, across a single sentence, messianism’s predominant social and theological coordinates shift just off-line and into something else entirely, something like a vulnerable attempt to trace trajectories of possibility latent within the present. Rather than calling out American imperialism’s inevitable destiny or the redemption of history, *vista* names an effort to come to terms with the forces pressing on both the present’s lived experience and the future’s possibilities. In its provisionality—by writing, unwriting, and writing again the terms of its ambivalent prophecy—*vista* functions as a figure precisely for registering—not sublimating—the present’s contradictory shape.<sup>18</sup>

I think we can see the shadow of this sense of “*vista*” moving around the edges of Whitman’s several poetic responses to the pivotal event of Lincoln’s assassination. “*Lilacs*” is, of course, only one of those, headlining a short cluster of poems mostly composed in 1865 and appearing together first in the 1871 “*Passage to India*” and then under the heading “*Memories of President Lincoln*” in subsequent editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Much has been written on the coherence of this small group of poems. Helen Vendler, in particular, reads the suite of Lincoln

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<sup>18</sup> For a consonant conclusion about the range of meanings in Whitman’s wartime messianism, see Michael Warner, “Civil War Religion and Whitman’s *Drum-Taps*,” in *Walt Whitman, Where the Future Becomes Present*, ed. David Haven Blake and Michael Robertson (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2008), 81-91.

poems as exemplary of lyric poetry's capacity to transpose and translate received social, philosophical, and religious values into new and repurposed meanings through the mediations of form.<sup>19</sup> I want to add here that in conjunction with the generic movements of the Lincoln cluster—from elegy, to ballad, to epitaph—there are also shifts in the perspectival location of the poetic voice, across which play both modulations in tone and the pitch of providential assurance. These shifts in perspective from poem to poem, mobilized by shifts in genre, enact the poetics of vista later described in the prose of *Democratic Vistas*.

The speaker of “O Captain! My Captain!” for instance, stands apart from a crowd of celebrants on shore, remaining instead beside the fallen Christ-like Captain who has narrowly prevented shipwreck. That simultaneous position of proximity to the wreckages of contemporary history and distance from a community of mourners yields a Christological undertone that is strikingly quiet in relation to other contemporaneous theologizations of the President's assassination, including that in Whitman's own late eulogy, “The Death of Lincoln.” By cluster's end, on the other hand, “This Dust Was Once the Man” vaults the poetic voice outside the bounds of affect altogether and into the impersonal distance of epitaph. The result is not a glimpse of providential ends but rather a single historical insight without the hint of any future promise: Lincoln's “cautious hand, / Against the foulest crime in history [...] saved the Union of these States” (*CP*, 468). The successive transformations in genre, then, do not yield a settled position, but serve as means to open and test new vantages onto a single, uneven affective terrain whose justification is by turns at hand or in abeyance. In the figure of “vista,” Whitman's effort to narrate the terms of a providential history from a present in crisis finds its stylistic expression in a

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<sup>19</sup> See Helen Vendler, “Poetry and the Mediation of Value: Whitman on Lincoln,” in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), [http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/\\_documents/a-to-z/v/Vendler\\_01.pdf](http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/v/Vendler_01.pdf).

perspectival restlessness, which in turn ripples through the ready-to-hand resources of genre (ballad, lament, epitaph), warping them in ways that quietly find correspondence with—or “tally,” to look ahead to “Lilacs”—the open-ended force of given social contradictions (*CP*, 465).

The epitaphic objectivity momentarily grasped by Whitman in the final poem, for example, yields a characteristically equivocal capstone, not only in its matter-of-fact materialism—its non-spiritualization of “This Dust”—but in its implicit historical judgment. In these lines, that is, Whitman memorializes Lincoln not as the Emancipator but as the preserver of the Union, and he identifies “the foulest crime in history” not as slavery but as secession. This not only speaks to Whitman’s poetic attraction to “Union” as both a social and spiritual category, nor only to his belief in the idealism of “nation”; it also speaks to the truth of his position within articulations of class and race at a moment when the experimental reproduction of each depended increasingly on the invention and enforcement of new or rearranged relations to land, labor-power, and capital. The historical objectivity written as epitaph is belied by the foregoing record of poetic and affective movement, however, with the overall effect being not the reification of history but the open record of struggle in poetry. The provisional ends grasped by Whitman’s vistas, in other words, cannot be dissociated from the lived trajectories of class and race gripping Whitman’s lived experience. In hindsight, for instance—even the hindsight of 1873—“This Dust” rings not with sentimental homage so much as tragic irony. The geographical expansion of petty-commodity production paid for by lives lost in the war for Union, that is, served as one of the very conditions of possibility for the continued accumulation of industrial capital, which in turn would spell doom for the already fading social position of the white independent producer Whitman (and Lincoln) so idealized. From Whitman’s immanent position within the uneven landscape of struggle, of course, there was little way of knowing this. Yet one can sense the very contradictory character of this position in the protean forms and divergent tones of Whitman’s poetic vistas, particularly as they take shape in his



writing around and about the Civil War.

Preceding *Democratic Vistas* by some years, “Lilacs” stakes its work as an elegy on the dense and passionate choreography of perspective, expectation, and feeling that I have outlined here as Whitman’s poetics of vista. Whitman times the movements of that choreography, however, to a distinct set of rhythms—those of the nocturne—that end up rearticulating elegiac consolation’s poetic and affective character. In the mid-1860s, in the immediate and uncertain aftermath of a conflict precipitated by the intensifying competition among distinct forms of social reproduction, Whitman tunes into an established model of poetic feeling around loss, defeat, consolation, and endings that we have come to call *elegy*. But he does so in surprising ways.

### 3. “THAT . . . PSALM IN THE NIGHT”: ELEGY AS NOCTURNE

That Whitman should turn to elegy in response to Lincoln’s death and the Civil War’s end is hardly surprising, especially following the dense and passionately felt poems of the war and the wounded body in the rest of *Drum-Taps*. As unconventional a poet as Whitman was, the consolatory tradition of English-language elegy offered a vital poetic tool for rendering poetry eloquent to the experience of personal and collective loss. At the same time, the elegiac *topos* of consolation—of finality, punctuality, and redemptive futurity—empowers the genre to grapple with the times of crisis and transformation that conditioned Whitman’s present.<sup>20</sup> Whitman approaches elegy not only with the problem of how to mourn an exemplary death, then, but also with that of imagining the continuation or rebirth of social life following the attenuated crisis of social reproduction during the late 1850s and early 1860s. Faced with the open question of social

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<sup>20</sup> Mutlu Konuk Blasing has made a similar case. Blasing, “Whitman’s ‘Lilacs’ and the Grammars of Time,” *PMLA* 97.1 (January 1982): 31-39. Where Blasing sees Whitmanian experimentalism as fundamentally disruptive of a conservative elegiac tradition, however, I would argue that Whitman turns to elegy as a poetic resource for the work of grasping his present.

regeneration following the destruction (of lives, of value) wrought by a war that would help decide what social forms life in America could take, Whitman stakes out modes of poetic feeling that can open alternatives to messianic logics of expectation and punctuality while still trying to envision the possibility of consolation.

Across sixteen sections, “Lilacs” measures and tests the permanence of loss and the possibility of consolation within the typological rhythms of rebirth that order the turnings of day, season, and year. The poem moves, for example, by weaving together the thought of death (Lincoln’s, but also the collective suffering of the war) with two objective figures for seasonal and cosmological rebirth—the lilac and Venus. And it culminates in the ventriloquized nocturne of a thrush’s lament, prompting an apocalyptic vision whose consolatory promise is both anticipated across the poem and unfamiliar to the terms of Christian elegy.

As the first four sections triangulate attention among the lilac, Venus, and the “gray-brown bird,” the poem follows the westward movement of Lincoln’s coffin (*CP*, 464). The cyclical process of subjective mourning thereby tracks the linear narrative arc of Lincoln’s funeral train. Ordering that poetic double motion, moreover, is a temporal loop that begins and ends at night: the nightly arrival of Venus in the April sky arranges the time of mourning, and sundown measures both the funeral train’s movement and the poet’s elegy. This cosmological rhythm is also marked socially, in daily life’s ebb and flow, so that the “floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking sun, burning” become aligned with “all the scenes of life and the workshops, and the workmen homeward returning” (*CP*, 462).

Indeed, the underlying social forces outlined above make themselves felt most immediately in the poem’s sidelong attention to midcentury America’s diverse geographies of social production. From bustling cities, to small towns with their “workshops,” to the independent farms of Lincoln’s plains, Whitman’s poem not only surveys the sections lately at war; it also features a veritable

where's where of midcentury Northern political economy. It's entirely conventional to backdrop the time of grief with the time of work, of course. English-language elegy typically represents death as an interruption to the seasonal cycles of agrarian production, and mourning as the necessary work that realigns human and natural metabolisms. (One could think here of the "Pastures new" that beckon the shepherd away from mourning at the end of John Milton's paradigmatic "Lycidas" (1638), for example.<sup>21</sup>) Counterposing these productive spaces in "Lilacs," though, is not an icon of spring's new growth but the brackish swamp from which the thrush sings and to which the poet is gradually drawn. As I detail below, that swamp figures as a kind of inverted vista, a spatial and thematic counterpoint to the poem's primary elegiac tropes. The swamp also, however, edges the poem's imaginary landscapes of uneven development and Northern social life: it shadows the poem as a particularly resonant yet implicit landmark of the South.

The swamp serves as a distant reminder of the sectional war otherwise held offstage and, at a farther remove, of the history of slavery and abolition that the poem represses altogether. Indeed, in Whitman's 1860 ode to the "Magnet-South," a swamp admits plantation slavery into the poem: "The piney odor and the gloom, the awful natural stillness, (here in these dense swamps the freebooter carries his gun, and the fugitive has his conceal'd hut;)" (*CP*, 584).<sup>22</sup> This swamp is much like the swamp of "Lilacs," marked by pine trees and gloom, yet in the later elegy, the poetic icon of the thrush replaces the marginal figures of Southern plantation slavery, the fugitive slave and the white freebooter. In "Lilacs," then, rather than "Pastures new," the unproductive, liminal,

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<sup>21</sup> John Milton, "Lycidas," in *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merrit Y. Hughes (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1957), line 125.

<sup>22</sup> On the swamp in nineteenth-century American thought, see David C. Miller, *Dark Eden: The Swamp in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989); William Tynes Cowan, *The Slave in the Swamp: Disrupting the Plantation Narrative* (New York: Routledge, 2005); and Anthony Wilson, *Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture* (Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2006).

and fugitive zone of the swamp—that place of quiet, hopeful, parenthetical solidarity—proves pivotal to the poem’s mourning work.

Admitting “Lilacs” attunement to Venus rather than the sun, to the crepuscule rather than the dawn, and to the end—or refusal—of the workday rather than its beginning, I want to emphasize something that has received little extensive treatment elsewhere—namely, that Whitman’s elegy is also a nocturne. As Elisa New has argued, “Lilacs” nocturnality informs Whitman’s peculiar deployment of the Christian elegy’s messianic *topoi*.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, nocturne places the poem’s cyclical revolutions just out of step with the Christological temporality of punctual redemption conventionally figured in the eclipse of Crucifixion and the sunrise of Resurrection. I will argue, though, as a supplement to New, that this sidestep into night has as much to do with the midcentury crisis of social reproduction as it does with Whitman’s brand of Emersonian Romanticism. In other words, it is the nocturnal revisions to elegy that come to mediate most intimately the contradictions immanent to the social forms of Whitman’s moment.

The misalignment between the poem’s nocturnality and elegy’s Christological stakes comes fully to the fore in section 8, where, by way of a single moment of visionary transport, the poetic speaker strives and ultimately fails to exit elegy:

O western orb sailing the heaven,  
Now I know what you must have meant as a month since I walk’d,  
As I walk’d in silence the transparent shadowy night,  
As I saw you had something to tell as you bent to me night after night,  
As you droop’d from the sky low down as if to my side, (while the other stars all  
look’d on,)  
As we wander’d together the solemn night, (for something I know not what kept me  
from sleep,)  
As the night advanced, and I saw on the rim of the west how full you were of woe,  
As I stood on the rising ground in the breeze in the cool transparent night,  
As I watch’d where you pass’d and was lost in the netherward black of the night,  
As my soul in its trouble dissatisfied sank, as where you sad orb,

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<sup>23</sup> See Elisa New, *The Regenerate Lyric: Theology and Innovation in American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993).

Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone.

(*CP*, 461)

Whitman here manifests a contact point with the star of elegy through an inverted poetic syntax that uses anaphora to defer grammatical closure. The incantatory “as. . . night” structure holds open a nocturnal interval of communion with the star as it hovers just above the western horizon, about to give way to sunrise. Unlike in “The Sleepers” (1855), however, poetic sleeplessness does not occasion a sublime leveling. And the celestial body’s proximity fails to deliver the kind of revelation glimpsed in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” (1859). Rather, poised together on “the rim of the west,” Whitman stretches for the significance of a point of communion between the spheres of “heaven” and earth, a point that offers deliverance from human history into the full time of Christian judgment. In the poem’s numerical middle, Whitman figuratively reaches for the eschatological midpoint between here and hereafter.

Section 7 heralds this move by a sudden dilation of grief—from one sprig of lilac for the singular coffin of Lincoln to “copious” armfuls of flowers for the “coffins all” of the Civil War (*CP*, 461). This synecdochal reminder of the extent of historical loss challenges elegy’s logic of exemplarity. As if to test the possibility that Christian elegy’s familiar tools might still hold, though, the poem pitches the vertigo of punctual redemption against the accumulated losses of the war. But “Lilacs” nocturnal and cosmological coordinates preclude this option. Venus is not the sun, in other words, nor even the sun’s opposite, the moon; and while it is poetically adjacent to them in many ways, it does not run in the same orbit of Christological expectation. Try as Whitman might to fix the star hanging over the horizon line, it will not hold its position as the portent of millennial sunrise. But if the poem does not inhabit the time of punctuality ordered by sunrise/sunset, then what kinds of rhythms does it follow? What, in other words, is the proper time of Whitman’s elegy as nocturne?

The first step in the poem's answer to these questions comes in its tense incipit, where Whitman lays out his elegy's recurring symbols and sets them in motion:

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,  
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,  
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,  
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,  
And thought of him I love.

(*CP*, 459)

Inaugurated by the very first word, the poem begins with a proliferation of static time markers: “When,” “last,” “early,” “night,” “shall,” “ever-returning spring.” These words set the coordinates for a thickening circulation of tense. The first stanza moves, for example, from the simple past (“When lilacs last . . . bloom’d . . . I mourn’d”) to a promised, recurring future (“and yet shall mourn”), all within a single complex sentence. Notably, though, there is no present action—only “I mourn’d, and yet shall mourn.” Nonetheless, these two stanzas belong to a present tense of poetic invocation, sensed deictically, as it were, in the imagistic grip of the lilacs and the great star in lines 1-2, and haunting the gap between the “mourn’d” and the “shall mourn” of line 3. This imagistic present characterizes the time of devotion—here, to the “mourn’d”: it is the present reminder that in the future one must remember (and mourn) the past. By attaching devotion to seasonal and diurnal rhythms at the ends of lines 2-3, Whitman adds a further turn to the poem’s movement, such that the final remembrance of the past functions implicitly to guarantee a future: in the nocturnal reminder to remember is the acknowledgment that, come spring, one will remember again.

The second three-line stanza almost perfectly mirrors the first, with the words “ever-returning spring” and the end rhyme across lines 3 and 4 (“spring,” “bring”) providing the overlapping hinge between the two. Thus, from the future-facing full stop that closes the first

stanza, the poem turns on “ever-returning spring” as a pivot into the present time of mourning. With the return of spring, the first stanza’s three elided past participles translate into the “perennial” present tense of the second stanza’s gerunds, with spring now blooming and the star again following its path along the western horizon. This uncanny reverse motion brings the anticipated, or the promised (“sure”), “thought” of both the past and the elegiac object—the unnamed, barely glimpsed “him I love.” Cavitch rightly points out that these opening stanzas install a contrapuntal pattern that orders the entire poem.<sup>24</sup> I would add that that these stanzas locate the elegy’s nocturnal itinerary within a rhythm of cosmological/affective coming and going (“night after night”) rather than within that of the singular event. Thinking back to the two types of messianism that the passage from *Democratic Vistas* above holds in suspension, the initial logic of deliverance outlined here evokes Exodus rather than Crucifixion/Resurrection.

But “Lilacs” also traces the limits of this typology, which finally feels inadequate to the polyrhythmic temporality implicit in the over- and underlapping revolutions of day and season. Section 8 is less a desperate interruption of this rhythm of devotion than it is an emotionally freighted tempo shift—a poetic attempt to slow the poem’s turning long enough to grasp the potential still point of revelation. The inverse of this slowing movement, whose axis is horizontal (section 8 brings the star to the poet’s level), is the acceleration and flight to altitude of vista in section 12, where the poet reaches the star’s stratospheric position. There, across six lines, the poetic speaker sees the day’s entire trajectory from sunrise to sunset in a visionary expectation of the returning “welcome night and the stars, / Over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land” (*CP*, 463). This acceleration and flight to altitude represents section 8’s ecstatic counterpoint. Vista

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<sup>24</sup> See Max Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006), 244-45.

is as fleeting as the fallen star's bottomed-out despair but, as in *Democratic Vistas*, it answers the negation of messianic assurance.

Between these two poles—of “dissatisfied [sinking]” and flight—Whitman introduces two other durational rhythms into the elegy's nocturnal calendar that contrast the revolving ones of flower and star: namely the diurnal time of social life (“Pictures of growing spring and farms and homes, / With the Fourth-month eve at sundown”) and the “limitless” steadiness of the thrush's song, emerging from the “cedars and . . . pines so still” (*CP*, 462). In so doing, Whitman tacitly juxtaposes two different poetic models for mourning's temporality—one that cycles and one that persists. In its effort to describe the dense temporality of mourning the present, in other words, “Lilacs” turns back to an Ovidian concern with the different modes of ecstatic grief when ordered by either the flower, the stars, or the evergreen.

Indeed, Venus' very figural alignment with spring, rebirth, and mourning in “Lilacs” reaches back to April's mythological and etymological alignment with the planet and the goddess Venus.<sup>25</sup> This resonance helps to bring “Lilacs” into closer orbit with the more forceful and familiar Venus and Adonis myth from *Metamorphoses*, in which Venus' dying lover transforms into a perennial flower that calls forth the annual performance of death and mourning:

My grief,  
Adonis, shall be memorialized, and every year  
Your death and my grief will be reenacted  
In ritual. . . .<sup>26</sup>

But in addition to the lilac's ritual cyclicity, Whitman turns to the equally Ovidian “cedars and . . . pines,” whose cross-seasonal endurance pulls against the “perennial” returns of grief, flower, and star. The intertext here is also *Metamorphoses*, though now it is Book 10's Cyparissus

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<sup>25</sup> See Ovid's *Fasti*, for instance, where the poet “sing[s]” “Times and their / reasons, . . . and constellations sunk beneath the earth and risen.” Ovid, *Fasti*, trans. Anne Wiseman and Peter Wiseman (New York: Oxford UP, 2011), 63.

<sup>26</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Stanley Lombardo (Indiana: Hackett, 2010), bk. 10, lines 831-34.



and the Stag, in which Apollo transforms the eponymous youth into the evergreen cypress, forever pointing toward the stars.<sup>27</sup> Instead of directing the poetic gaze upward as in Ovid, however, Whitman's evergreens lead the poetic persona away from his contemplation of Venus. The cedars and pines in "Lilacs" spatialize dusk—as swamp, as recess—as a place of communion held apart from cyclical rebirth. Whitman thereby installs a figure for material persistence against which the poem works and to which it finally—and surprisingly—gives in.

Indeed, the poem's final lines give us a tense, almost simultaneous alignment of these two Ovidian figures for poetic grief:

Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,  
There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim.  
(CP, 467)

This fragile synthesis begins to emerge in section 14 where, in the afternoon light at "the close of day," the poem envisions the ongoing time of social recomposition and the song of the thrush in immediate succession:

Under the arching heavens of the afternoon swift passing, and the voices of children  
and women,  
The many-moving sea-tides, and I saw the ships how they sail'd,  
And the summer approaching with richness, and the fields all busy with labor,  
And the infinite separate houses, how they all went on, each with its meals and  
minutia of daily usages,  
And the streets how their throbbings throb'd, and the cities pent—lo, then and  
there,  
Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping me with the rest,  
Appear'd the cloud, appear'd the long black trail,  
And I knew death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death.  
(CP, 463-64)

Rather than providing an ironic foil for death, these crepuscular scenes of daily life invert the conventional day/night dyad; here it is waking life that constitutes the periodic rest from grief, a period whose durative experience revitalizes the poetic subject's mourning work. Accordingly, it is

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<sup>27</sup> See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, bk. 10, lines 141, 146.

social reproduction's "throbbing" rhythms that finally deliver the poet into the arms of death and the "shadowy cedars and ghostly pines":

Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,  
And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me,  
And I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the hands of companions,  
I fled forth into the hiding receiving night that talks not,  
.....  
To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still.  
(CP, 464)

Here, the "sacred knowledge of death" and the poetic icons for death's permanence move into proximity with daily life's regular rhythms and the city's doubly throbbing collective body. As the thought and knowledge of death enter the poem's epicycles of nocturnal, affective, and cosmological times, however, the one does not break the other.

Indeed, the cloud's descent at the inflectional moment between day and night in these lines elicits a different kind of nocturnal flight than in section 8. The poet "fle[es] forth" here not out of a desire for the stopped, fulfilled time of afterlife promised by the star of elegy but rather in the close company of death and finally in communion with the "gray-brown bird," the spiritual cousin to the poetic speaker. The latter finally invites death fully into the poem:

*Come lovely and soothing death,  
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,  
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,  
Sooner or later delicate death.*  
(CP, 464)

In this remarkable turn, Whitman accepts the pathos of loss by formally turning the poem into a ventriloquized nocturne. He invokes death in the same terms as he did night several lines earlier—as the permanent, universalizing combiner: "*In the day, in the night, to all, to each.*" But the leveling praised here is not the inevitable humbling of "each" and "all" brought down to the earth; it is, rather, the embracing realization of collective relation:

*And for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise!*

*For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.*  
(CP, 464)

The speaker's metamorphosis into thrush subtly reverses Ovidian transformation: here grief modulates surprisingly into love and mourning pivots into desire.<sup>28</sup> The tone of this poetic reversal is easy and welcoming, even as it approaches the tenor of ecstasy:

*Approach strong deliveress,  
When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing the dead[.]*  
(CP, 465)

Whitman here lovingly submits to the certainty of death as an ending without the proviso of subsequent rebirth. As he does so, he also welcomes the uncertainty and unknowability of that ending's arrival—"Sooner or later"; "*When it is so*"; "*when thou must indeed come, come unfalteringly*" (CP, 464, 465). Here the poem begins to unhinge the passionate comings and goings of its different overlapping rhythms from the expectation of redemptive release. On no calendar of its own or of the poem's, the poet's reception of death offers a kind of grace that "tall[ies]" rather than transcends historical suffering (CP, 467). Nor, then, does that reception obviate or destroy the daytime rhythms of "the streets" and the fields that immediately precede the thrush's song; rather, it fulfills the poem's imagination of collective vitality:

*Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields and the prairies wide,  
Over the dense-pack'd cities all and the teeming wharves and ways,  
I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death.*  
(CP, 465)

This admission not only lets in the "throbbing" vibrancy of the body, singular and collective; it also radically revises the elegy's apocalyptic expectations and its traditionally promissory consolation.

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<sup>28</sup> For the Homeric—especially Illiadic—basis of this inversion in Whitman's thought, see Wai Chee Dimock, "Epic and Lyric: The Aegean, the Nile, and Whitman," in *Walt Whitman, Where the Future Becomes Present*, 17-37, esp. 17-20.

In the final two sections, the cause of grief that has pulled at the entire poem finally comes into the foreground, and the poetic speaker attains another hard-earned vista. Suddenly, using the language of Revelation (“And I saw. . . And . . . And. . .”), Whitman sees the human carnage of the Civil War battlefield in “long panoramas of vision” (*CP*, 465).<sup>29</sup> Consolation for the lost, however, manifests not in the promised resurrection of the dead but in the continued suffering of the living, of those “that remain’d” (*CP*, 466). In the lines that open the final section, this vision too has passed, or, rather, is “passing”:

Passing the visions, passing the night,  
 Passing, unloosing the hold of my comrades’ hands,  
 Passing the song of the hermit bird and the tallying song of my soul,  
 Victorious song, death’s outlet song, yet varying ever-altering song,  
 As low and wailing, yet clear the notes, rising and falling, flooding the night,  
 Sadly sinking and fainting, as warning and warning, and yet again bursting with joy,  
 Covering the earth and filling the spread of the heaven,  
 As that powerful psalm in the night I heard from recesses[.]  
(*CP*, 466)

Released into the thickness of this fully present time—so present it is hardly there, it is only “passing”—the poem accelerates the tempo of the minor inflectional turns through figure, image, and tone that it has made so much of throughout. Amid this movement, the first two stanzas’ “ever-returning spring” quietly turns into the poet/thrush’s “ever-altering song.” In the minimal sonic difference between these phrases, we have shifted registers: from a poetic present gripped by elegy’s epicyclical turnings of day, season, and sky to poetic feeling’s “ever-altering” modulations in response to the divergent rhythms of social and poetic metabolism. At the stanza’s center, in the dense overlap of diurnal, seasonal, and poetic times registered in the line-by-line transformations of this stanza’s present tense, Whitman stumbles onto a familiar word—“joy.” That note echoes the thrush’s song, and it will reappear five years later in *Democratic Vistas* as the reward for living

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<sup>29</sup> Rev. 21 (King James Version).

through Reconstruction. Here, as elsewhere, this “joy” is fraught and temporary—or “passing”—modulating again, through the rhythms of nocturnal and seasonal turning, into the vulnerability of radical aspiration and despair.

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Whitman scholars have long emphasized the darkening tone in Whitman’s treatment of death and mortality across his Civil War and post- Civil War writing. In the so-called “sorrow” manuscript pages, for instance, written shortly after Lincoln’s assassination for the poem that would become “Lilacs,” Whitman follows a train of association that leads from “sorrow” to “partial or total darkness / (as the gloom of a forest—gloom of midnight)” to, finally, “something that strikes down—as by Almighty[.]”<sup>30</sup> Contrast this perspective to the assurance in 1855 that “All goes onward and outward . . . and nothing collapses, / And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier” (*CP*, 32). A decade after these lines were first written, Whitman in the “sorrow” pages sketches loss as an imposition absent any metaphorical payoff rather than an unexpected gift within immanent regenerative chains. The above reading of “Lilacs,” however, shows how he nevertheless continued to grapple with the child’s question from “Song of Myself”—“What is the grass?”—or the problem of how to apprehend in poetry large-scale processes of natural and social metabolism (*CP*, 31).

What his notes on “sorrow” show, however, is that Whitman in 1865 grasps the present contours of this problem generically. He threads the question of elegy (“sorrow”) through the nocturne (“the gloom of midnight”) and begins to test what that mix might mean for a materialist

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<sup>30</sup> Whitman, “Sorrow,” in *The Walt Whitman Archive: A Facsimile of the Poet’s Manuscripts*, ed Joel Myerson, vol. 1, *Whitman Manuscripts at the Library of Congress* (New York: Garland, 1993), available online at Walt Whitman Archive, accessed August 15, 2019, <https://whitmanarchive.org>

poetics with its eye on consolation. In the “sorrow” pages, this experiment leads Whitman to strike out the “Almighty[’s]” image in and as history—or the link between historical suffering and divine justification.<sup>31</sup> Over its sixteen sections and multiple movements, “Lilacs” elaborates that tense conclusion, developing it into an anti-messianic consolation “different from what any one supposed,” through which the poetic voice can move back and forth between “sorrow” and “joy” without abstracting from history’s ambivalent unfolding.

Whitman’s elegy offers something different than the abstract democratic philosophy of America that we’ve been taught to see as his equivocal legacy, in other words. Like other prominent elegies in English, “Lilacs” brings a kind of apocalypticism into the present of history. That present, however, occupies a nocturnal interval in between the dazzling events of Christological death and resurrection. As far as the elegy genre is concerned, that shift in time of day and poetic address (from the sun to the evening star) matters. Whitman’s 1860s were shaped by the increasingly forceful yet dispersed pressures of capitalist social reproduction. Those pressures, I argue, begin to account for the specificity of the elegiac structure of feeling in “Lilacs.” In the 1860s, what Whitman felt was needed was not so much how democratic assurance might be guaranteed within the future-light of providence but how something other than a messianic mode of expectation might sustain the present tense of feeling within contradictory and increasingly crisis-prone social arrangements. By the 1870s, newly dominant rhythms of accumulation would make themselves felt to a degree before unseen by the world, and with important consequences for

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<sup>31</sup> For some, Whitman striking out “the Almighty” could serve as evidence of a secularizing tendency coeval with American democracy (which is to say, modernity) itself, to which Whitman’s poetry would once again stand as a monument. Indeed, John Michael has recently offered a version of this argument (*Secular Lyric: The Modernization of the Poem in Poe, Whitman, and Dickinson* [New York: Fordham UP, 2018]). Read from the perspective of capitalist social reproduction rather than either democracy’s or the lyric’s inevitable expansion, however, I think both the “sorrow” manuscript and “Lilacs” evince different preoccupations. Indeed, following the path out of the secularization thesis blazed not least by Americanists, I think we can more accurately see this moment as one in which Whitman reconfigures enchantment in response to the shifting articulations of a globalizing totality. See Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman, “Introduction: After the Postsecular,” in “After the Postsecular,” ed. Coviello and Hickman, special issue, *American Literature* 86.4 (December 2014): 645-54.

Whitman's hopes for American democracy. "Lilacs" mediates those laws' shifting force within American social life by counterposing the differing poetic rhythms of the day, season, and year. By twining them together, the poem occupies the pathos of a lived present at once damaged and up for grabs. "Lilacs" deflects elegy into nocturne, in other words, to find poetic and affective rhythms more suited to the uncertainties of struggle than to fulfilled expectations.

In this respect, Whitman's poetry begs reading not as the resolution to a chapter in the finished history of national or lyric becoming but rather as a field of poetic feeling alive to the shifting bases of accumulation as they were lived in racialized forms of social reproduction at midcentury. Such a shift in emphasis can offer new directions for reading Whitman within the related histories of American capitalism and poetry, and more generally for seeing at what levels those two histories might intersect. It also suggests some of what literary criticism might gain from retooling largely philosophical vocabularies of nation and subjectivity in order to better engage with ongoing work in political economy. Finally, this emphatic shift delineates a set of *topoi* and structures of feeling, oriented by that easily overlooked idea of poetic occasion, that makes itself felt in different ways across North American poetry's divergent strands well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As June Jordan remarks in the wake of another global capitalist crisis (1973): "I too am a descendant of Walt Whitman. And I am not by myself struggling to tell the truth about this history of so much land and so much blood, of so much that should be sacred and so much that has been desecrated and annihilated boastfully."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> June Jordan, "For the Sake of People's Poetry: Walt Whitman and the Rest of Us," in *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 252.

There is one thing about the Negro in America which most thoughtful persons seem to ignore: the Negro is in solution, in the process of solution. . . . The supreme fact of mechanical civilization is that you become a part of it, or get sloughed off (under). Negroes have no culture to resist it with (and if they had, their position would be identical to that of the Indians), hence industrialism the more readily transforms them. A few generations from now, the Negro will still be dark, and a portion of his psychology will spring from this fact, but in all else he will be a conformist to the general outlines of American civilization, or of American chaos. In my own stuff, in those pieces that come nearest to the old Negro, to the spirit saturate[d] with folk-song; *Karintha* and *Fern*, the dominant emotion is a sadness derived from a sense of fading, from a knowledge of my futility to check solution. There is nothing about these pieces of the buoyant expression of a new race. The folk-songs themselves are of the same order. The deepest of them. "I aint got long to stay here." Religiously: "I (am going) to cross over into camp ground." Socially: "my position here is transient. I'm going to die, or be absorbed."

When I come up to Seventh Street and Theatre, a wholly new life confronts me. A life, I am afraid, that Sherwood Anderson would not get his beauty from. For it is jazzed, strident, modern. Seventh Street is the song of crude new life. Of a new people. Negro? Only in the *boldness* of its expression. In its healthy freedom. American. For the shows that please Seventh Street make their fortunes on Broadway. And both Theatre and Box-Seat, of course, spring from a complex civilization, and are directed to it.

—Jean Toomer

## CHAPTER 2

### THE ADEQUACY OF JEAN TOOMER'S *CANE*: MIXED FORM AND UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT

In a letter to Waldo Frank a few months before the publication of *Cane* (1923), Jean Toomer writes at length about the linked fortunes of modern art and "the Negro in America."<sup>1</sup> In terms that attest to the entanglement of socialist and progressive discourses around

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Toomer to Waldo Frank, January 1923, in *Cane*, ed. Rudolph P. Byrd and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Norton Critical Editions, 2011), 166.



industrialization, anthropology, and race, Toomer describes what he sees as “the Negro’s” twinned trajectory: material absorption into “mechanical civilization” and cultural assimilation into “American chaos.”<sup>2</sup> But the thought of industry and machines quickly morphs into a thought about generation and psychology, which itself yields an insight about religion and music. What Toomer hears in the folk-songs’ metaphysical language of transmigration is the polyvocal sound of a racialized peasantry on the move, which is also a “swan-song” to a human type.<sup>3</sup> Contrasting the world of the Negro folk, on the other hand, are the “new” rhythms of black Washington, D.C. A “sense of fading,” then, while at the same time, somewhere else, “crude new life.” This head-spinning arrangement of binaries—technology and race, South and North, “old Negro” and “new,” folk and people—bears traces of the disparate influences moving through Toomer’s thought, from Frank to W. E. B. DuBois, Franz Boas, and Lewis Mumford. Here, it opens onto a kind of “double consciousness” that is distinctly Toomer’s: in this palpably transitional moment, the defining feature of the “American Negro” is not only that he is both black and American, but that he is at once rural and urban, agrarian and industrial, capable of “swan-song” and swing.

*Cane*, in other words, is in many ways *about* the unevenness of capitalist development in early twentieth-century America, when the fitful mechanization of production—especially in agriculture—and a newfound prominence in the capitalist world system were beginning to attract global flows of both labor and capital as well as the particular revolutionary energies that came with them. Shut off from European immigration by the War, Northern capital turned with increasing energy to the South, where the pull of higher wages and relative racial peace met long traditions of autonomous black organizing against racist violence and exclusion, spurring a massive transfer of

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<sup>2</sup> Toomer to Frank, January 1923, 166.

<sup>3</sup> Toomer to Frank, January 1923, 166.

black labor from Southern fields into the Northern urban workforce.<sup>4</sup> Such changes fundamentally reconfigured the ways in which race and class were produced and in turn lived across a period of both acute downturn and increasing concentration of capital, giving rise to new forms of social antagonism—not least the antiblack “race riot” and the militant “New Negro.”

Toomer, who from the late teens to early twenties made deliberate studies of agronomy, socialist theory, and the history of “slavery and the Negro”—as he put it in a 1921 letter to his friend Alain Locke—was well poised to register these shifting social tectonics.<sup>5</sup> Active in New Negro reading groups in Washington, D.C. as well as in socialist and avant-garde intellectual circles on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Toomer began writing poetry, drama, and fiction at the same time as he was sending essays about the Red Summer to publications like the socialist *New York Call*, or letters-to-the-editor contesting liberal dismissals of radical civil rights to major magazines such as *The Nation*. “Solution,” we might say, is the Marxist category of formal subsumption articulated in the idiom of cultural anthropology mediated by way of Frank’s cosmic regionalism.

By the time Toomer came to arrange the texts of *Cane*—most of which were written between 1918-22—these disparate interests were themselves coming into solution in a melancholic humanism sensitive to the myriad articulations of material constraint indexed by modernity. *Cane*’s overarching form signals its sense of historical purview: the book is composed of three parts, the first taking place in the fictional Middle Georgia town of Sempter (based on Sparta, where Toomer spent three months as an assistant school principal), the second in Washington D.C. and Chicago, and the third returning to Sempter. The first two sections are composed out of the mixture of

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<sup>4</sup> See Jacqueline Jones, *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor* (New York: Norton, 1998); Harold D. Woodman, “Class, Race, Politics, and the Modernization of the Postbellum South,” *Journal of Southern History* 63.1 (1997): 3-22; and James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Toomer to Alain Locke, 26 January 1921, in *The Letters of Jean Toomer, 1919-1924*, ed. Mark Whalan (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2006), 19.

individual poems and prose pieces—character sketches, anecdotal narratives, quasi-mythic allegories—while the third is a single, long piece of dramatic prose. In *Cane*’s movements back and forth between North and South, country and city, verse and prose, neither the urbanizing, wage-intensive North nor the residually agrarian South seem to allow for the realization of black humanity, just as neither the new “jazzed, strident, modern” music of Seventh Street nor the passing folk songs of Middle Georgia are capable of “check[ing] solution.” At times in *Cane*, this alternating motion leads Toomer to listen in on the work songs of Georgian tenant farmers, or to make georgic poetry out of the itinerary of Negro day-laborers as they leave work and navigate the systems of capture, dispossession, and extra-judicial violence that keep the economy of the New South—like the old—running. Just as importantly, it takes shape in frustrated experiences of sexual desire or religious ecstasy—in sonnets denatured by racial violence, or would-be prophecies betrayed by the middle-class mores of shallow materialism. As *Cane*’s episodes again and again fail to outrun “the terrors of American history,” as Charles Scruggs and Lee VanDemarr put it, the amalgamated social relations of American capitalism during the 1920s express themselves in an amalgamated aesthetic form that willfully withholds any hint of redemption.<sup>6</sup>

In the voluminous record of *Cane* scholarship, Toomer’s interest in the unevenness of American modernization has been glossed primarily in terms of a modernist poetics of failure and fragmentation. In this chapter, I’m going to argue that something besides a binary of historical tragedy or transcendence develops out of Toomer’s attention to the social world of the Great Migration: namely, a tenuous and often fleeting sense of poetic adequacy, of being momentarily equal to social and historical circumstance. I take impetus for this in part from the way Toomer and some of his most sympathetic readers articulated *Cane*’s significance at the time. “Thanks for

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Scruggs and Lee VanDemarr, *Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History* (Philadelphia: U of Penn P, 1998).

your good words on *Cane*,” Toomer writes in a 1923 letter to Countee Cullen in response to Cullen’s praise for the recently published book: “I particularly liked the line: ‘a classical portrayal of things as they are’ for in this I find you sensitive to my purposes. If *Cane* is an achievement, then, on the side of content, it is a segment of contemporary (at least) reality, and, in its esthetic phase, it is prose and poetry adequate to the expression of this reality.”<sup>7</sup> In the affirming reflection offered by Cullen’s response, Toomer sees *Cane* as the right kind of work at the right time, and its sufficiency derives in no small part from its formal mixedness—“poetry *and* prose.” In what has appeared to other readers as *Cane*’s hybridity, fragmentation, or pessimism—in short, its modernism—I see traces of an occasional sensitivity to aptness—a sense that the heterogeneous “solution” in which the “American Negro” was held after the War was best met with a mixed form.

Becoming adequate to the expression of contemporary reality also means finding ways of surviving the confrontations with its terrors. Without wanting to return to an older interpretive paradigm that sees *Cane* as ultimately salvific, I do want to suggest that, though fleeting, there are evident traces of lift or lines of flight across *Cane* that ought to be read as other than idealist yearning or betrayal of an otherwise rigorous modernism. I see these especially in moments of what I want to call poetic combination, which are often—though not always—achieved through metaphor, and which frequently emerge in an effort to think across the social, historical, and geographical unevenness of capitalist social reproduction in the early 20s. These moments, lightly consolatory, do not try to erase or transcend the violence of American social life rendered throughout *Cane*; but they do momentarily recede from them, even if only toward unnamed and perhaps unnamable horizons. They allow Toomer, I think, to discern other possible relations to history than failure, if only just. The tendency to read *Cane* as a “swan-song,” in other words, often

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<sup>7</sup> Toomer to Countee Cullen, 1 October 1923, in *Letters*, 179. Emphasis added.

renders as monument what might otherwise be seen as self-conscious ephemerality, a sensitivity to the contemporary moment as a discrete historical interval. In addition to everything else it signifies—not least biographical—*Cane*'s elegiac mode arguably encodes a sense of itself as a time-bound form intended toward contemporary reality—as, in short, occasional.

In order to make this argument, I begin by taking an unfamiliar tack on *Cane*'s most familiar piece, the poem "Song of the Son." Toomer's most anthologized work, "Song of the Son" is typically seen as emblematic of both Toomer's short-lived identification with his African American heritage and *Cane*'s aestheticizing impulses. From the perspective of the modernist *Cane*, "Song of the Son" seems to stand for everything the rest of the book troubles—a Romantic mode of lyric prophecy that would recover an organic relationship between modern poet and pre-modern folk. I suggest we see the poem and its significance for *Cane* differently. By resituating it in its initial appearance in the NAACP magazine, *The Crisis*, I show how it functioned not as the anthology piece it has long been known as, but as a well-timed political poem, serving to both galvanize support for the Dyer Antilynching Bill and announce the arrival of a new Negro (and New Negro) poet. More, its revisions to the young genre of lynching poetry help to foreground some of the thematic and formal concerns that will occupy *Cane*—especially the transitional time of dusk, the relationship among poet, landscape, and history, and the occasion itself. "Song of the Son" moves directly in the wake of "Lilacs" and asks a question familiar to Whitman: how to be "in time" with an occasion—lynch violence but also the broader struggles around work and freedom that it indexes—that is at once punctual and atmospheric, spectacular and historical.<sup>8</sup> Its answer is to give the Christological topos of the lynching poem a liturgical shape, imagining

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<sup>8</sup> Jean Toomer, *Cane*, 16. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

transgenerational solidarity through a choral subject that is at once contemporary and anachronistic.

In *Cane*, “Song of the Son” comes to hold a tentative place where poetry approaches consolation, a function that I argue we should see not as a letdown in *Cane*’s modernism, but as an indication of a broader generic pattern—that of the *prosimetrum*, a genre of mixed-form writing with roots going back to Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* and post-Classical Menippean satire before that. Although rarely considered a lively modern genre, recent work among both medievalists and comparatists has drawn attention to the geographically and historically extensive vitality of *prosimetric* writing.<sup>9</sup> More immediately proximate to *Cane* are DuBois’s *Darkwater* (1920) and William Carlos Williams’s *Spring and All* (1923), both of which use the logic of formal medley and alternation to worry over similar problems to those that preoccupy Toomer—namely the shifting conjunction between race and work and the aftermath of the revolutionary period of 1917-19.<sup>10</sup> Each of these texts is typically classified as a singular modernist experiment, despite evident shared features and concerns. Without trying to make a point about classification or tradition, I will suggest that *Cane* belongs to a discernible *prosimetric* moment, when something about the line between verse and prose not only excited experimental *frisson* but also seems to have yielded a sense of compatibility between form and history, which, if it could not heal the wounds of modernity, could at least offer a workable poetic standing—“poetry and prose adequate to the expression of contemporary reality.” Across *Cane*, “Song of the Son’s” sense that it needs to find other voices in order to properly meet its occasion expands to a sense that no one poem,

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<sup>9</sup> See for instance Peter Dronke, *Verse with Prose from Petronius to Dante: The Art and Scope of the Mixed Form* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994); *Prosimetrum: Crosscultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose and Verse*, ed. Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1997); and Eleanor Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> For a reading of Williams’s *Spring and All* in relation to the ongoing question of the Russian Revolution, see Mark Steven, *Red Modernism: American Poetry and the Spirit of Communism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2017).

story, or vignette is sufficient to the expression of contemporary reality on its own. Prosimetry, I suggest, then, can offer a useful heuristic—at once formal and historical—for reading *Cane*, because it sets in relief a set of themes—consolation, renewal—long identified with *Cane* but rarely described as generic. I hope to suggest something along just those lines, arguing that the alternating movements of the prosimetry offer Toomer a means of “adequating” his text to an occasion as determinate as it was vast: namely, the racialized re-composition of the wage-relation amidst the intensifying shift to industrial production in the U.S.

#### 1. “THY SON IN TIME”: TOOMER’S OCCASIONAL POETICS

In the spring and summer of 1922, Toomer began introducing himself in letters to editors he admired, such as Claude McKay and John McClure, and announcing his intention to be a poet. In the pitch for himself that he developed, Toomer positioned his recently found calling as a writer as the distillation of broader social forces. The loose biographical sketch he provided to the editors of *The Liberator* in August of 1922, for instance, narrates his developing identity as a poet in terms of a deepening social and class consciousness: “Within the last two or three years, . . . my growing need for artistic expression has pulled me deeper and deeper into the Negro group. . . . A visit to Georgia last fall was the starting point of almost everything of worth that I have done. . . . Now, I cannot conceive of myself as aloof and separated. My point of view has not changed; it has deepened, it has widened.”<sup>11</sup> He continues with an account of his and his family’s class trajectory as it leads him to the vocation of the poet:

The comparative wealth which my family once had, has now dwindled away to almost nothing. We, or rather, they, are in the unhappy position of the lowered

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<sup>11</sup> Toomer to *The Liberator*, 19 August 1922, in *The Letters of Jean Toomer*, ed. Mark Whalan (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2006), 70-71.

middle-class. . . . I have worked, it seems to me at everything: selling papers, delivery boy, soda clerk, salesman, ship-yard worker, librarian-assistant, physical director, school teacher, grocery clerk, and God knows what all. Neither the universities of Wisconsin or New York gave me what I wanted, so I quit them. Just how I finally found my stride in writing, is difficult to lay hold of. It has been pushing through for the past four years. For two years, now, I have been in solitude here in Washington. It may be begging hunger to say that I am staking my living on my work. So be it. The mould is cast, and I cannot turn back even if I would.<sup>12</sup>

The Pinchback family's slow decline into the "lowered middle-class" leaves Toomer in a familiar position; as the family's wealth dwindles to "nothing," Toomer is exposed to the need to work at anything, or "everything," in the way of gainful employment, from low-level professional and clerical work to skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled labor. If Toomer's "worth" as a poet emerged through his contact with black life in Georgia, then, his identity as a poet hinges on a downward social mobility that suspends him at a level in between classes. It was, indeed, just this "begging hunger" within a "lowered middle-class" position that had brought Toomer the opportunity to be a temporary school teacher in a rural school in Sparta, Georgia.

In "staking [his] living on [his] work," Toomer began to seek out poetic means of mediating his transformative encounter with black rural life in the South. Broken into five regularly rhymed stanzas, "Song of the Son" memorializes a just-in-time meeting between the poetic persona and the purportedly diminishing world of black agrarian life in the South, emblemized by the spirituals and identified with organic figures like the soil, pine trees, and the sun:

O land and soil, red soil and sweet-gum tree

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<sup>12</sup> Toomer to *The Liberator*, 71. This language repeats almost verbatim a similar account Toomer sketches of himself in an earlier letter to John McClure, editor of the New Orleans-based *Double Dealer*, which published a number of Toomer's pieces; see Toomer to McClure, 30 June 1922, in *Letters*, 40-41.



So scant of grass, so profligate of pines,  
Now just before an epoch's sun declines  
Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee,  
Thy son, I have in time returned to thee.

In time, for though the sun is setting on  
A song-lit race of slaves, it has not set;  
Though late, O soil, it is not too late yet  
To catch they plaintive soul, leaving, soon gone,  
Leaving, to catch they plaintive soul soon gone.

It thereby stages a communion among the speaker, a landscape, and its "folk" across a punctual sunset freighted with the weight of epochal decline. The poem's direct evocation of timeliness, in this regard, is often understood as a vehicle for its last-minute retrieval of an imagined way of life now saved for posterity by the poem itself. In *Cane*, the "dark purple ripened plum[]" saved by the speaker just before "an epoch's sun declines" can easily be seen to stand in for both the poem and the book the reader holds, the fruit of Toomer's journey to the South which successfully captures the folk life he witnessed there:

O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums,  
Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air,  
Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare  
One plum was saved for me, one seed becomes

An everlasting song, a singing tree,  
Caroling softly souls of slavery  
What they were, and what they are to me,  
Caroling softly souls of slavery.

(16)

The poem's imagined meeting between the modern visionary poet-speaker and the life-giving source of a pre-modern peasantry thereby narrates the author's and the text's very conditions of possibility. Under this aspect, too, the poem has come to stand as a headline for New Negro Renaissance aesthetics writ large, in which the modern artist seeks to synthesize the modern black subject and the folk life of the past.

Before “Song of the Son” appeared in *Cane* and before it appeared in leading Renaissance anthologies, however, the poem circulated in the April 1922 issue of *The Crisis*, the NAACP outlet run by DuBois whose literary section was edited by the poet Jessie Fauset. In *The Crisis*, it received a full page of space in between a review of Benjamin Brawley’s *Social History of the American Negro* (1921) and an NAACP report on the state of the Dyer Antilynching Bill. This is an unusually prominent placement for a poem in the magazine, which was far more often inclined to squeeze poetry into the bottom margins of its pages crowded with prose reportage. No less prominent a position for the poem than Locke’s *The New Negro*, perhaps, but differently so. Indeed, “Song of the Son” appeared in *The Crisis* at a key moment in the fight for the Dyer bill, which had passed the House in January of 1922 but was being held up in the Senate by Democratic filibuster (it would be dismissed without a vote later that year). *The Crisis*, whose 1919 report on lynching had been pivotal in debunking (at least among Republican policymakers) the connection between lynching and sexual violence against white women, routinely mobilized art as an adjunct to its journalistic, legislative, and direct-action tactics.<sup>13</sup>

The placement of “Song of the Son” in its April 1922 issue neatly illustrates that point. Toomer’s poem mediates the movement from Fauset’s Brawley review to the Dyer bill report, playing the hinge in a mini-argument that works across shifts in tone and mode. Fauset praises Brawley’s book for “substantiat[ing] all those vague feelings, . . . by collecting and re-threading the scattered beads in the chain of our racial existence [and] present[ing] to us our racial life as a whole,” and she connects that historical work to the reassurance that “our hopes for the future are not in vain.”<sup>14</sup> As if taking Fauset’s cue, the third word in the Dyer bill report is “victory,” as its

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<sup>13</sup> See Susan Edmunds, “The Race Question and the ‘Question of the Home’: Revisiting the Lynching Plot in Jean Toomer’s *Cane*,” *American Literature* 75.1 (2003): 141-68.

<sup>14</sup> *The Crisis* (April 1922), 260.

author sets out to keep momentum up in the effort to exert pressure on the federal government, building toward a call for donations to the NAACP so it can carry on its advocacy. In between, we get the first published poem of the young Jean Toomer. This particular sequence—review, verse, polemic—is suggestive for seeing how the moment’s mixed-form thinking emerged within broader developments in print culture.<sup>15</sup>

More importantly, though, the pathos of Toomer’s poem reads somewhat differently in *The Crisis*: less as nostalgia for an idealized agrarian past than as appeal to a collective memory of survival and resistance to racist terror in the present. In between a survey of African American history and firsthand accounts of contemporary lynchings, that is, the “old tree” stripped of fruit stands out all the more clearly as an image of the lynching tree, while the poem’s final apostrophe in the fourth stanza to “Negro slaves” as “dark-purple ripened plums, / Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air” reverberates with a palpable immediacy across the surrounding pages. It draws praise into such painful proximity with mourning as to make the two inseparable, line-break notwithstanding. Further, the appeal to “Negro slaves” sounds less like an idealization in this context than a recognition of continuity across change. Given lynching’s prominence as a technology of Jim Crow, that is, by overlaying it onto the subject of plantation slavery the poem produces an asynchrony through which the ongoing reproduction of racialized unfreedom might be apprehended. This asynchrony, absent uplift as it is, rubs against the progress narrative of *The Crisis*’s surrounding pages; at the same time, its invocation of living history also helps to bridge the journal’s historical argument and contemporary political agenda. Indeed, while in an anthology (and to some extent in *Cane* as well) it’s easy to hear the poem’s final quatrain primarily as a sonic

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<sup>15</sup> Within the vast body of scholarship on modernism and print culture, I’m drawing in particular here on Anna Sigríður Arnar’s reading of Stéphane Mallarmé’s typographic experiments, which she traces directly out of the margins of the French newspapers the poet read and published in. See Arnar, *The Book as Instrument: Stéphane Mallarmé, the Artist’s Book, and the Transformation of Print Culture* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011) 171-238.

resolution—tying off the poem’s pattern by moving from ABBA to ABAB—in *The Crisis* the penultimate line’s overwriting of past into present—“What they were, and what they are to me”—sounds out more emphatically as a spiritual summons directed ultimately to the journal’s readership. If in *Cane* “what they are to me” is relatively ambiguous, in *The Crisis* it is less so: “they” are those who live on in and through present struggles, are those whom present struggles might even redeem.

In deploying Toomer’s poem in this way, *The Crisis* continued a strategy of antilynching organizing going back to the late nineteenth century and the international acclaim of Ida B. Wells’s activist journalism. Indeed, writers and activists had long made use of print circuits to counter the remediation of terror central to lynching’s significance as a tool of white supremacy.<sup>16</sup> “In the predominantly oral cultures of the post-Reconstruction rural South,” Susan Edmunds writes, “rumors of past and future lynchings had the power to choke open expression of protest and self-assertion in African American communities[.] But when they were translated into print and circulated internationally, the same lynchings became equally powerful catalysts in the collective work of black self-enfranchisement.”<sup>17</sup> Antilynching stories, poems, and plays, in other words, marked a charged intersection between the cultural politics of black literacy and the organized struggle against ongoing forms of expropriation and terror. Accordingly, they proved useful to both liberal claims on black citizenship and cross-racial declarations of solidarity within socialist and anti-imperialist circles.<sup>18</sup> Given the importance of verse culture within projects of African American

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<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond*, ed. Anne P. Rice (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2003); Amy Louise Wood, “Lynching Photography and the Visual Reproduction of White Supremacy,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 6.3 (2005): 373-99.

<sup>17</sup> Edmunds, 144.

<sup>18</sup> The former has been stressed above the latter, although work on the Scottsboro Boys campaign and cross-racial solidarities in the 30s suggests that antilynching literary imaginaries could be as important to the articulation of “the proletariat” as to “the citizen,” a history which goes back to the immediate postwar. On communist antilynching organizing, see Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1990), 34-57, 85-90, 121-30.

literacy, in particular, antilynching poetry can be seen as taking on a heightened significance in this context, charged at once with transmuting the horrors of racial terrorism and attesting to the African American subject's capacity for poetry, which for some was proof in itself of "racial progress."<sup>19</sup> In the case of *The Crisis* and "Song of the Son," giving such pride of place to an unpublished young poet whose name would have nevertheless been familiar among black intellectuals in both New York and Washington D.C. can therefore be read as a resonant gesture in its own right.

This is also to say that, by the last decade of the nineteenth century, lynching violence had emerged not only as an important literary-political topos, but also as a recognizable poetic occasion in the rather restricted sense that it served to license both poets and poems, be they literary or popular, read or recited, printed or sung. Much like funereal elegy in earlier moments in poetic history, the lynching poem took shape as a form of socially recognized and critically motivated poetic production. And by the first decades of the twentieth century, it bore with it both a set of suitable verse-forms—especially the ballad and the sonnet—and a stable of literary and religious tropes—above all the cross and the Christ-figure.<sup>20</sup> "Song of the Son" was not only mobilized by DuBois and Fauset within these occasional parameters, however; it also thematizes them. In order to more fully appreciate how, it's worth surveying two of the poem's exemplary interlocutors.

Take first Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Haunted Oak" (1913), which offers a dramatic monolog in ballad verse from the perspective of a lynching tree whose own vitality has been sapped by the moral crime it was an unwitting party to: "I am burned with dread, I am dried and dead /

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<sup>19</sup> On the relationship between African American verse culture and literacy that would produce a poet like Toomer, see especially Nadia Nurhussein, *Rhetorics of Literacy: The Cultivation of American Dialect Poetry* (Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 2013). On the figure of the "redeemer-poet" in African American cultural imaginaries, see Gates's discussion of Paul Laurence Dunbar in his *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988).

<sup>20</sup> See James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011) for an overview of the underlying theological history of these tropes in black theology.

From the curse of a guiltless man.”<sup>21</sup> The poem’s lynching plot involves the deception of a trio of local white luminaries—the town judge, doctor, and minister—who trick the local jailor into releasing the falsely accused man into their hands. This perversion of society’s moral order is redoubled in the poem’s dramatic conceit of the speaking tree. Dunbar’s poem, that is, ventriloquizes a kind of inverted true cross, a tree transfigured by an act of gratuitous violence unjustifiable within the very terms of Christian sacrifice it inhabits. Accordingly, the tree has become not a relic but a “haunted bough.” Indeed, there is no room for redemption or resurrection in the poem’s mortified landscape: “And ever the judge rides by, rides by, / And goes to hunt the deer, / And ever another rides his soul / In the guise of a mortal fear.”<sup>22</sup> In the immediate absence of either earthly or divine justice, the gothic figure of the unnaturally dead tree promises only the haunting of the crime’s perpetrators.

A decade later, in the wake of the Red Summer, Claude McKay’s sonnet, “The Lynching,” in *Harlem Shadows* (1922) places lynching violence within a similar logic of desecration, although in this case the emphasis falls not on the cross but on the figure of a black Christ:

His spirit is smoke ascended to high heaven.  
 His father, by the cruelest way of pain,  
 Had bidden him to his bosom once again;  
 The awful sin remained still unforgiven.  
 All night a bright and solitary star  
 (Perchance the one that ever guided him,  
 Yet gave him up at last to Fate’s wild whim)  
 Hung pitifully o’er the swinging char.  
 Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view  
 The ghastly body swaying in the sun:  
 The women thronged to look, but never a one  
 Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue;  
 And little lads, lynchers that were to be,  
 Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, “The Haunted Oak,” in *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, ed. Joanne M. Braxton (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1993), 219-20.

<sup>22</sup> Dunbar, 220.

<sup>23</sup> Claude McKay, “The Lynching,” in *Selected Poems of Claude McKay* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953), 37.

Like in Dunbar's "Haunted Oak," the felt resemblance between lynching and crucifixion in McKay's poem exposes a set of disjunctions between the Christ-story and the lynching plot at each of its turns. First, God's summons to the "spirit" of another Christ-like son to "ascend to high heaven" guarantees not universal forgiveness but its opposite, that "The awful sin [will] remain[] unforgiven." The second quatrain in turn sees the star of Christ's birth shift from a sign of messianic significance to a marker of Fate's arbitrariness. It "hangs" lifeless in the sky as a cosmic doubling of the lynched body. Finally, the "ghastly" resolution introduced by the volta of dawn brings with it the "fiendish" congregation of onlookers, who celebrate the grotesque ritual of whiteness in that unnervingly lilting final couplet.

Much of the scholarship on antilynching literature has rightly stressed the ways in which it makes use of moralistic arguments designed to shore up black respectability as the grounds for demanding civil and social equality.<sup>24</sup> These poems bear the marks of this tendency, relying on a strategy of reversal that emphasizes the bloodlust, deceptiveness, and dehumanization of whites whose pathologies are represented as violating the sanctity of the African American citizen. I want to emphasize here, however, that these poems access that moral argument by way of a tense engagement with the terms of a racialized Christology which fails to resolve in a moral order recomposed around exemplary black suffering. That is, neither the cross of the lynching tree nor the black Christ redeem in these poems; at the same time, neither is the religio-political framework of redemption dismantled. If these are not sentimental morality tales, in other words, neither are they examples of modernist disenchantment, if by the latter is meant something like the evacuation

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<sup>24</sup> See Edmunds; and Koritha Mitchell, *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1830-1930* (Champaign: U of Illinois P, 2011).

of meaning from religious structures of feeling. Instead, in both poems, lynching leaves an open social and theological wound.<sup>25</sup>

This rend in religious and poetic value wrought by lynching violence, I would suggest, registers the contradictoriness not only of democratic personhood, but also of the capitalist value relation in the ongoing recomposition of class after Emancipation.<sup>26</sup> Left-liberal, socialist, and communist antilynching campaigns oriented around the black worker (with which both McKay and Toomer were in touch) understood lynching along these lines—that is, not only as an arbitrary violation of rights, but also as a means to impose an ontological floor to the social cost of reproducing labor which was borne as race and marked by an exposure to gratuitous violence.<sup>27</sup> As part of the struggle to reassert the line between full and partial humanity no longer structurable by the absolute “freedom” to sell one’s labor power, lynching violence emblemized the disposability to the wage that delineated anew the human from its others.

“Song of the Son” engages the occasional poetics of the lynching poem in order to open a closer poetic relay between the messianic purview of black Christology and the historical feeling of epochal transition. The poem begins by invoking the occasional proximity between lynching violence and poetry that is the very condition for Dunbar and McKay’s poems. From its first word, it apostrophizes the oral-literate “song” of poetry transfigured from ascending “pine-smoke,” recalling both the spiritual ascent that launches McKay’s poem as well as the ventriloquized lament

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<sup>25</sup> These poems “detranscendentalize from *within* the precincts of the sacred,” as Jared Hickman puts it (*Black Prometheus: Race and Radicalism in the Age of Atlantic Slavery* [New York: Oxford UP, 2017], 23).

<sup>26</sup> See Michael Dawson, “Hidden in Plain Sight: A Note on Legitimation Crises and the Racial Order,” *Critical Historical Studies* (Spring 2016): 143-61. No longer juridically recognizable in terms of value embodied—of expropriable property rather than exploitable humanity—blackness after Emancipation came increasingly to mark value’s porous outside, even its potential negation—the sign of an unreliable and shifty population whose supposed threats to white humanity had to be disciplined and managed by an array of coercive state and social technologies, including that of a racialized Christian theodicy of sacrifice and atonement.

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, “The Souls of White Folk,” in *Darkwater*, 17-30; and Otto Huiswoud, “World Aspects of the Negro Question,” in *We Shall be Free!: Black Communist Protests in Seven Voices*, ed. Walter T. Howard (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2013), 4-13.



of Whitman's thrush in "Lilacs" (Sing on, sing on you gray-brown bird, / Sing from the swamps, the recesses, pour your chant from the bushes, / Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines):

Pour, O pour that parting soul in song,  
O pour it in the saw-dust glow of night,  
Into the velvet pine-smoke air tonight,  
And let the valley carry it along,  
And let the valley carry it along.

(16)

The immediacy of this address also attests to an important shift in perspective from Dunbar and McKay's poems. In contrast to the narrative distance of their speakers, Toomer's poetic persona here is *in* the Christological scene of the lynching poem: the "son" who speaks is at once the black Christ crucified by Jim Crow and the poet who tries to reimagine what that crucifixion might promise. This doubled position is captured in the chiasmic pattern with which the poetic speaker names himself:

Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee.  
Thy son, I have in time returned to thee.

In time, for though the sun is setting on,  
A song-lit race of slaves, it has not set

By articulating his own subjectivity through the self-inverting logic of chiasmus, the speaker announces his arrival within one of the preferred rhetorical grammars of Biblical messianism, one that, by virtue of its X-shape, is associated especially with the figure of the cross. But the chiasmus Toomer uses here is of the more restricted kind, in which the same elements are repeated in interlocking positions. This is parallelism absent transformation, in a turn familiar from Dunbar and McKay, now expressed as repetition with a difference that seems to make little difference.

Yet the single moving part in the chiasmic interchange—the phrase "in time"—does suggest that an intervention has been made, though of what kind and to what end it remains difficult to

discern. The meaning of the phrase “in time” is almost maddeningly uncertain, that is, as it shifts positions across three successive lines and one stanza break. It plays with multiple senses—of delay and expectation (“in due time”), of duration (being present in the temporal), and of punctuality (of making it “in time”), each of which move just slightly at cross-currents to one another. The cumulative effect is to scramble the terms of messianic rupture otherwise installed by the figure of the sunset. Like in Whitman’s elegy for Lincoln, Toomer here makes use of the crepuscule to both signify and detourn the figurativity of an apocalyptic calendar. But “Song of the Son” reads the poetic work of “Lilacs” back through the realities of anti-black terror. The seed salvaged from slavery in the final stanza bears the strange fruit of both the lynch mob and song—the fraught separation between which finally collapses in the black Christological image of the lynching tree as “a singing tree.” The privileged figure for Whitmanian elegy—“death’s-outlet-song into life”—which in “Lilacs” renders black suffering at most implicit to the operations of capitalist history, is grasped in its truth by Toomer as a resource for a “late” poetic reckoning with the interpersonal, economic, and social violences of racialization in America. So while the punctuality of dusk makes the Christology of both elegy and the lynching poem accessible, just as dawn amplifies that significance for McKay, the successive folding and unfolding of the speaker “in time” makes the moment and what it means hard to pin down. The speaker is at once on time and belated, is “in time” rather than against it:

In time, for though the sun is setting on  
 A song-lit race of slaves, it has not set;  
 Though late, O soil, it is not too late yet  
 To catch thy plaintive soul, leaving, soon gone,  
 Leaving, to catch they plaintive soul soon gone.

Toomer uses the poetic interval of the sunset writ periodic, in other words, to frame a moment of trans-historical solidarity, a poetic meeting between “Negro slaves” and New Negro at the indeterminate tangent between “soil” and “soul” that the phenomenon of lynching violence, backlit

by sunset, throws into relief. That encounter makes the identification between speaker and “song-lit race of slaves” possible.

Toomer uses the poetic occasion of lynching violence to imagine how a collective subject, at once provisional and anachronistic, comes to be made and sustained “in time,” over against the simultaneously progressive and naturalizing theodicy of value in America. The effect is to render the occasioning significance of lynching violence at once more implicit and more general than other examples of the genre. As the event of the lynching gets displaced by the gradients of sunset, its violence becomes discernible only by the retrospective shadows cast at dusk by poetic figures, from profligate pine trees, to bursting plums, to the “singing tree.” With the poetic diffusion of racial terror into the atmosphere, as it were, however, there is no room in the poem for the white perpetrators that feature so prominently in the Dunbar or the McKay. Instead, we do get the literal ground against which the figures of the lynching poem move, or the Georgian landscape of contemporary Jim Crow agroindustry. “The soil,” Toomer writes in an early notebook, “is tilled land, saturate with the life of those who have worked it.”<sup>28</sup> As “song” and “son” blur together, so too do the “soil” and “soul” that the setting son/sun meets, producing a mirage-like image in which the poem itself comes equal to the compressions of historical time conditioning its present. By including pines and sweet-gum trees alongside pine-smoke and strip-cleared valleys, Toomer juxtaposes the raw materials of Middle Georgian political economy and the production processes they enter, materializing Dunbar’s “haunted bough” within the worked-over regional landscapes of plantation agriculture and extractive industry.

In “Song of the Son,” then, Toomer tries to tune the poetic antenna of the lynching poem to the material landscapes of racialization in Georgia. At the same time, the play between

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Mark Whalan, “Jean Toomer and the Avant-Garde,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. George Hutchinson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 72.

transfiguration and containment that characterizes the critical pathos of the lynching poem is condensed into a single figure that blends the voices of poetic speaker, poem, and genre: the “singing tree” makes it finally unclear whether the “song of the son” is sung by or about the Christological voice that apostrophizes the historical, yet anachronistic subject of “Negro slaves.” It also stands in contrast to the “old tree bare” of the lynching tree/cross. It’s as if, in the movement from direct address to the choral voice of the final stanza’s “carol[],” Toomer is able to transform the dead cross of racial sacrifice into a living tree of elected kinship and shared struggle. In this respect, I would argue that claims for “Song of the Son’s” backward-facing idealism miss the mark. Rather, it’s only *through* “Song of Son’s” poetic reckoning with the problems of asynchrony and sentimentality characteristic of the lynching poem that Toomer adumbrates the social relations of present-day Jim Crow embodied in a subject—“souls of slavery”—that appears at once as in time and untimely, the shadow of a history being enforced in new ways on the present. In rendering the occasion of lynching violence atmospheric, in other words, Toomer is able to imagine a poetic stance—crepuscular and choral—that might meet it.

When Toomer publishes “Song of the Son” again in *Cane*, he does so out of the feeling that “[t]he concentrated force of a volume will do a great more than isolated pieces possibly could”; on its own, “Song of the Son” is insufficient, just as lynching violence itself overflows any of its instantiations.<sup>29</sup> In *Cane*, I want to argue next, even as Toomer seems to render futile “Song of the Son’s” apparent vision, he dilates the poem’s temporal and occasional logic into the wider generic pattern of the prosimetrum, a genre designed to console through its very movements between forms. With respect to debates about “Song of the Son” in relationship to *Cane*’s modernism, I will argue that we should see the poem as neither epitome nor symptom but waypoint, offering one

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<sup>29</sup> Toomer to John McClure, 22 July 1922, in *Cane*, 152.

figure for what *Cane*'s movement among and between forms might allow: an interval of recognition and contact.

## 2. PROSIMETRIC *CANE*, OR THE CONSOLATION OF POETRY

In the "Postscript" to *Darkwater*, DuBois offers an apology to the reader for the consistent presence of poetry in the work that follows:

Between the sterner flights of logic, I have sought to set some little alightings of what may be poetry. They are tributes to Beauty, unworthy to stand alone; yet perversely, in my mind, now at the end, I know not whether I mean the Thought for the Fancy—or the Fancy for the Thought, or why the book trails off to playing, rather than standing strong on unanswering fact. But this is always—is it not—the Riddle of Life?<sup>30</sup>

Posed as a retrospective from the writer before the reader has even encountered the table of contents, this strange little defense of poesy moment arguably poses more problems than it solves. There's no reason to doubt the earnestness of DuBois's modesty, per se (he never identified as a poet), but the rhetorical understatement is a bit unsettling. The poems of *Darkwater* are "[t]ributes to Beauty" yet "unworthy to stand alone," and so "perverse" that they end up confusing the relationship between imagination and truth, play and fact. DuBois might have saved himself a lot of apparent confusion by merely publishing his poems elsewhere. But if the poems are unable to stand alone, their presence implies that the prose of *Darkwater* is equally one-sided. And so, the poems are scattered across *Darkwater*, each one following an essay as the second half of each of the ten numbered chapters. Often highly allegorical and with only loose connections to the prose

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<sup>30</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *The Oxford W. E. B. DuBois Reader*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Oxford UP, 1996), 483.

they follow, however, the poems seem less “alighting” than obscuring, concentrating but also blurring the already stylized prose of the essays around them. As such, they invite the kind of meta-poetic reflection that DuBois makes the first word his reader encounters. Although framed as his own confusion, DuBois makes it the reader’s problem to puzzle out the division of labor between thought and fancy across the book.

This earnest yet playful chicken-and-egg question is the rhetorical problem of the mixed-form work, and of the prosimetrum, in particular, that species of discourse that designs to move or instruct its reader by alternating between verse and prose, melody and argument, rhetoric and philosophy. We think of modernism exposing new vulnerabilities in the defense of poetry in light of the War, but DuBois’s “Postscript” has a longer historical purview, going back to poetic arguments about the suitability of different forms to different purposes or occasions. Poetry, meant to please, could have disastrous effects in a situation where instruction is called for; and instruction, without delight, is rarely very effective. For Horace, then, and famously, the best and most salutary writing manages to do both.

In the most far-reaching example of prosimetrum, Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, the author develops mixed-form writing as the privileged vehicle for this combination and so in turn an important site for ethical formation.<sup>31</sup> Both written and staged during the period of Boethius’s imprisonment while he awaited trial and eventual execution, the *Consolation* seeks to address its author’s worldly and metaphysical despair at the apparent injustice of the universe. Boethius turns first to the passionate outlet of poetic lamentation, but is soon interrupted by Lady Philosophy, who appears on the scene to banish the poetic muses and offer a more rigorous course of treatment, one which tempers poetic feeling with reason and vice versa. Only in the

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<sup>31</sup> E. Johnson, 8.

movement between these modes, between feeling and thought, is Boethius able to realize the consolatory truths of the Christian universe and unburden his soul from the injustices committed against him by his false accusers. By turning prosimetrum into “a real-time spectacle of psychological transformation,” Eleanor Johnson argues, Boethius influentially rendered mixed-form writing protreptic—or performatively didactic.<sup>32</sup> The *Consolation* performs its literary theory of consolation via alternating forms; by making his own refashioning the subject of his dialog with Lady Philosophy, Boethius shows how the alternating movement between verse and prose might in itself be transformative.

DuBois turns to the mixed form with a similar set of concerns as Boethius about the nature of good and evil in a Christian universe but a world of men. Except for DuBois those metaphysical questions are materialized in “the real soul of white culture”—global capitalism.<sup>33</sup> It hardly seems coincidental that, as he surveys the wreckage of colonialism and world war and tries to chart the upside-down cosmology imposed on the world by European development, DuBois should turn to one of the foundational forms used to describe the moral universe of European Christianity.

For much recent Toomer scholarship, *Cane*’s significance lies in its structural refusal to give the reader any “little alightings” whatsoever. Once commonly taken to be a moving declaration of one writer’s short-lived identification with his racial heritage, contemporary readers of *Cane* are more likely to see it as a paradigmatic enactment of the modernist double-bind of expression and failure, of the call to give form to experience (or redemption to history) and the impossibility of doing so given the horrors of modernity. *Cane*’s lasting contribution, in this respect, is to give the self-consciously modernist aesthetics of fragmentation and loss the warrant of the American history

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<sup>32</sup> E. Johnson, 8.

<sup>33</sup> DuBois, 504.

of white supremacy.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, in their canonical framing of *Cane* in the Norton Critical Edition, Rudolph P. Byrd and Henry Louis Gates, Jr, present Toomer unequivocally as “a lyrical prophet of modernism” and *Cane* as the latter’s paradigmatic text.<sup>35</sup> Whereas for DuBois, they argue, double consciousness is something that might be unmade, “[f]or Toomer . . . fragmentation, or duality, is the very condition of modernity. It cannot be ‘cured,’ any more than the gap between the conscious mind and the unconscious can be obliterated.”<sup>36</sup> “Toomer,” they continue emphatically,

takes DuBois’s concept of double consciousness, and boldly declares that this fragmentation is, ultimately, the sign of the Negro’s modernity, first, and that the Negro, therefore, is America’s harbinger of and metaphor for modernity itself. . . . There is no end to the manifestations of fragmentation in *Cane* and no false gestures to the unity of opposites at the text’s end. No, in *Cane*, fragmentation is here to stay, for such is the stuff of modern life.<sup>37</sup>

Although this position is rarely put so stridently as here, the *Cane*-as-modernity-allegory thesis has largely become the standard view of *Cane*, if not also of Toomer and his strange literary biography.

In this view, *Cane*’s poetry is there to be disproven, to be given up. Indeed, in the only book-length study to date on the role of poetry in *Cane*, Karen Jackson Ford articulates *Cane*’s modernism in terms of a clash between Romantic lyric and technological modernity, with the latter ultimately winning out. For Ford, *Cane* dramatizes the modernist exhaustion of lyric inspiration, as the book’s early, tentative appeals to a visionary lyric whole run aground by book’s end against the

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<sup>34</sup> On Toomer and modernism, see Catherine Gunther Kodat, “To ‘Flash White Light from Ebony’: The Problem of Modernism in Jean Toomer’s *Cane*,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 46.1 (2000): 1-19; and Werner Sollors, “Jean Toomer’s *Cane*: Modernism and Race in Interwar America,” in *Dream-Fluted Cane: Essays on Jean Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Geneviève Fabre and Michel Feith (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001), 18-37.

<sup>35</sup> Robert P. Byrd and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “‘Song of the Son’: The Emergence and Passing of Jean Toomer,” in *Cane*, lxiv.

<sup>36</sup> Byrd and Gates, lxiii.

<sup>37</sup> Byrd and Gates, lxiii.



grim realities of technological modernity; Toomer's finely wrought genre poems in part 1 become free-verse "scratching choruses" in part 2 and finally exit the stage in part 3.<sup>38</sup> "[T]he fact that lyric poetry cannot be recovered even when the narrative returns to the South in part 3," Ford argues, "points to the function of lyric in *Cane*: its function is to fail."<sup>39</sup> In this respect, Toomer's stated concern with the contemporaneous transformation of "the Negro peasant" into a "pseudo-urbanized . . . semi-Americanized" social fragment expresses itself in a vision of the lyric's subsumption into a fractured modern world.<sup>40</sup> For Barbara Folely, who reads *Cane*'s self-constricting modernist tendencies in light of the pains of revolutionary disappointment, Toomer's binaries are more dialectical and the failure they script is more historical: *Cane* keeps glimpsing movements of capitalist totality before repressing its own revolutionary stirrings. The book's central contradiction, in Folely's account, is between an idealism and a materialism formalized in the distinction between poetry and prose, respectively. Toomer's modernism, born from revolutionary disappointment, never quite lets him synthesize that dualism into radical critique, turning him instead toward organic metaphors and the vagaries of Frank's cultural democratism. But that modernist reflex should be understood, Folely argues, as an aesthetic mediation of the actually stalled dialectic of revolutionary history. In this account, *Cane*'s poetry frequently mystifies the material realities of Jim Crow that it grasps elsewhere in its prose.

As convincing as these arguments are—and they are indeed bravura readings of both *Cane* and Toomer's biography—they tend to treat its mixedness, its obsession with intervallic time, and its anxiety about aesthetic consolation as *sui generis* when I think we have good reason to see them as meaningfully generic, prosimetric, in fact. Or rather, they read as self-contradiction what I argue

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<sup>38</sup> Karen Jackson Ford, *Split-Gut Song: Jean Toomer and the Poetics of Modernity* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2015), 1.

<sup>39</sup> Ford, 7-8.

<sup>40</sup> Toomer to Frank, 26 April 1922, in *Cane*, 149.

we should see precisely as mixedness. Indeed, the very preoccupation with the function of *Cane*'s poetry that crops up across these arguments signals a deep continuity with the theoretical problem of mixed-form writing—namely, under what conditions is it appropriate to be poetic, and toward what ends.

*Cane* as a whole grasps the unevenness of contemporary capitalist development in a crepuscular poetics of stalled human development enacted in the neither-nor movements of its mixed form. In particular, the book develops a rigorous anti-pastoral logic in which neither the pleasures of poetic form nor the apparent lessons of narrative fable offer any response to the despairs of history. The relation between male poet and feminized landscape that would, in the pastoral mode, allow for the flowering of full human and aesthetic potential is continually denatured by regimes of racial terror in the agrarian South and wrong life in the urbanized North. Beginning with Karintha, who miscarries a fatherless child in a pine-forest soon to be stripped for the nearby sawmill, and ending with Kabnis, “a promise of a soil-soaked beauty [. . .] Suspended above the soil whose touch would resurrect him,” the generativity of heterosexual love is haunted by enslavement and the contemporary threat of lynching violence (109). Even when that threat feels remote, there always seems to be either too much or too little eros in *Cane*, or it comes too early or too late, leading both Toomer's authorial stand-ins and the female types across the book to frustration, abandonment, or even death. Work in *Cane*, meanwhile, that other pastoral value, is just as hollow. In a landscape whose cotton economy has been devastated by boll-weevil, *Cane*'s middle Georgian agricultural workers are “Black reapers” moving between field and sawmill—tenant labor and wage contract—at risk of displacement from the mechanical “mower” while constrained by the color line (7). Part 2's aspiring intellectuals, meanwhile, are left without muses or an audience; “poor m[e]n out of work” (57), they are crushed by the weight of the city's material infrastructure: “Rhobert wears a house, like a monstrous diver's helmet, on his head. [. . .] His

house is a dead thing that weights him down” (42). In “Kabnis,” finally, Lewis, the only seemingly whole figure of a poet who might fulfill his role as synthesis between folk and modern cultures, disappears ignominiously, and Kabnis himself rejects the potential revelation of Father John by returning to work in a trade—wagon repair—that will soon be obsolete. *Cane*’s anti-pastoral, Margaret Ronda concludes, “[r]eject[s] any images of progress, continuity, or futurity in favor of images of immediate lack and uncertain survival.”<sup>41</sup>

Under the conditions of Jim Crow, Kabnis’s stated desire to “shap[e] words t fit m soul” comes out all wrong: “The form that’s burned into my soul is some twisted awful thing that crept in from a dream, a godam nightmare, an wont stay still unless I feed it. An it lives on words. Not beautiful words. God Almighty no. Misshapen, split-gut, tortured, twisted words” (109). This is, of course, *Cane*’s apical modernism. Neither Fancy nor Thought, poetry nor prose, it seems, can remain whole when all the parts (man/woman, nature/society, intellectual/manual labor, poet/audience) are so irreparably sundered. Accordingly, just pages after “Song of the Son,” we get the lynching story the poem tried to ward off, poetic caroling notwithstanding the material infrastructures of New South political economy, which make violence look like fate:

Up from the skeleton stone walls, up from the rotting floor boards and solid hand-hewn beams of oak of the pre-war cotton factory, dusk came. Up from the dusk the full moon came. Glowing like a fired pine-knot, it illumined the great door and soft showed the Negro shanties aligned along the single street of factory town. The full moon in the great door was an omen. Negro women improvised songs against its spell. (31)

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<sup>41</sup> Margaret Ronda, “‘Work and Wait Unwearying’: Dunbar’s Georgics,” *Modernism/Modernity* 127.4 (2012), 875.

*Cane* does not offer a blueprint for ethical refashioning, to say the least, and its mixture of poetry and prose offers little of either delight or instruction. In fact, it makes ethical self-fashioning look impossible, and the movements of mixed form seem able only to describe the tightening limits of the poet's cell.

And yet. Without disputing the facts of the case, as it were, I want to suggest that *Cane* retains traces of the consolatory imperative developed across traditions of mixed-form writing, even if diminished.<sup>42</sup> I'm struck, in this regard, by the final option in the slew of alternate paths through the book that Toomer outlines to Frank in the letter he sent in advance of the final manuscript:

The book is done. From three angles, CANE's design is a circle. Aesthetically, from simple forms to complex ones, and back to simple forms. Regionally, from the South up into the North, and back into the South again. Or, from the North down into the South, and then a return North. From the point of view of the spiritual entity behind the work, the curve really starts with Bona and Paul (awakening), plunges into Kabnis, emerges in Karintha etc. swings upward into Theatre and Box Seat, and ends (pauses) in Harvest Song.<sup>43</sup>

Offered in passing, the "spiritual" angle on the circle casually reimagines not only *Cane's* sequence, but its argument as well. From this other vantage point, *Cane* narrates in part Toomer's own

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<sup>42</sup> In addition to Boethius and DuBois, another potential source feeding into *Cane's* mixed form might well be the Japanese *haibun* tradition. Toomer, who experimented actively with *haiku* forms and studied Eastern philosophy in the late teens, was likely familiar in particular with Basho's great mixed form work, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1702). The latter's famous *haiku* poems are interspersed with a range of prose diaries to compose a record of the poet's journey to Japan's northern hinterlands. The thematic resonance with Basho is striking. As the scholar Donald Keene puts it, Basho undertook his journey in an effort "to renew his art by direct contact with sites that had inspired the poets of the past" (Donald Keene, *Travelers of a Hundred Ages* [New York: Columbia UP, 1999], 311). Such a mission resonates directly with Toomer's understanding of the significance of his stint in Georgia, as well as with Toomer and Waldo Frank's (in)famous trip to Spartanburg, South Carolina, which produced both Frank's *Holiday* (1923) and was meant to provide further impetus for Toomer's own writing. On a different front, French literary tradition also associates the *prosimetrum* primarily with travel literature (primarily of the eighteenth century); see Jacques Charpentreau, *Dictionnaire de la poésie* (Paris: Fayard, 2006), 528-29, s.v. "Mélange de prose et de vers."

<sup>43</sup> Toomer to Frank, 12 December 1922, in *Cane*, 162-63.

*bildung* as author: “Bona and Paul” was first written in 1918 based on Toomer’s experience of tacitly passing in college, narrating his “awakening.” “Kabnis” and “Karintha,” once end and beginning, now become middle points, with “Kabnis” marking a terminus to the story of the aspiring poet of “Bona and Paul,” who, it turns out, survives to write “Karintha” before returning North. The sequence then rests with “Harvest Song,” the major poem of part 2, in which the poetic persona looks southward again across the gap of migration to the other “reapers of the sweet-stalk’d cane, cutters of the corn” (69). Read inside out, as it were, *Cane*’s prosimetric shape does indeed become, weirdly, protreptic; latent in the rigorous allegory of modernity that we have is the spiritual formation of the subject who came to avoid Kabnis’s fate and produce the book we read.

If this is so, then what we are left with? Both a lot and a little, it turns out, or just enough to keep going, which, for Toomer, is close to plenty. In Toomer’s “spiritual” ordering of *Cane*, a book that is otherwise structured around violation and separation from front to back suddenly begins with a moment of physical coming together, albeit not the one expected. Indeed, “Bona and Paul” stands out among the other prose of *Cane* because the failed connection between the titular would-be lovers is answered by something other than subjective shattering. Paul, a look-alike for the college-aged Toomer, is halted before he can realize the philosophical and physical union that he desires with the white Bona by the knowing look of a black doorman. Faced with the externalization of his own desire in a man to whom he would want to convince his friends he bears no likeness, Paul ultimately leaves Bona to seek understanding from the doorman by way of a high-minded soliloquy on the aesthetic and natural beauty of physical love:

“Brother, youre wrong.

“I came back to tell you, to shake your hand, and tell you that you are wrong. That something beautiful is going to happen. That the gardens are purple like a bed of

roses would be at dusk. [. . .] I came back to tell you, brother, that white faces are petals of roses. That dark faces are petals of dusk. That I am going out to gather petals. That I am going out and know her whom I brought here with me to these Gardens which are purple like a bed of roses would be at dusk.”

Paul and the black man shook hands.

When he reached the spot where they had been standing, Bona was gone.

(77-78)

Bona is gone, but something else has happened in the meantime: the terrifying shadow of lynching violence that follows interracial desire (indeed any desire) throughout *Cane* is transformed into the feminized work of “gather[ing] petals,” which Paul strangely comes to do on behalf of the doorman, bringing the latter a potential way of knowing sexuality outside the violence of the lynching triangle. Turning his back on plot in favor of metaphor, Paul loses the thread of the narrative in favor of a temporary symbolic repair.

Instead of beginning and ending with episodes of failed heterosexual reproduction, *Cane* now begins and ends with moments of provisional, cross-class black male solidarity. Indeed, “Harvest Song” makes a fitting counterpoint to “Bona and Paul.” The alternate itinerary that begins with Paul’s awakening now comes to rest with the mature poet seeking out “other harvesters” across space and time, opening a call “(Eoho, my brothers!)” across his own blindness and the landscape’s devastation:

I am a reaper whose muscles set at sundown. All my oats are cradled.  
But I am too chilled, and too fatigued to bind them. And I hunger.

.....

My eyes are caked with dust of oatfields at harvest-time.  
I am a blind man who stares across the hills, seeking stack’d fields  
of other harvesters.

(69)

Like the handshake at the end of “Bona and Paul,” Toomer hedges his bets significantly here, couching his poetic summons in a sense of belatedness that renders it seemingly hopeless. Yet the poem offers it nonetheless, even if parenthetically:

It would be good to hear their songs . . . reapers of the sweet-stalk’d  
cane, cutters of the corn . . . even though their throats  
cracked and the strangeness of their voices deafened me.

I hunger. My throat is dry. Now that the sun has set and I am  
chilled, I fear to call. (Eoho, my brothers!)  
(69)

Starting in the city with a moment of lightly gender-bending solidarity between the young poet and the black waged service worker, we end with a tentative poetic call from the mature poet to the agrarian laborers that remain. Formally, in place of a trajectory that rises into poetry only to then fall away from it, this other *Cane* begins with narrative, moves into mixed form and ends, or pauses, with a poem set at the end of a workday that also appears to be the end of an epoch. In place of the monumental bookends of “Karintha” and “Kabnis”—broken modern woman and man, respectively—here we get the developmental arc of the poet reaching however tenuously toward the unnamed figures of Northern service and Southern agrarian labor staged in provisional moments of male homosocial contact.

The shift in angle here is just that—emphatic, nothing more. But I think it can help us reexperience *Cane*’s movements less as binarist than as interdependent and its circularity less as fate than as circumstance. No one story or poem is standalone, which is also to say that none is on its own sufficient to an occasion that is necessarily relayed across different geographies, historical velocities, and dispositions toward the color line. But this just means that each entry in *Cane* must reach to the others around it. “Harvest Song” “will not bring [the poet] knowledge of [his] hunger”; it needs “Bona and Paul,” just as “Karintha” and “Kabnis” form a pair that are either adjacent or opposite depending on one’s angle on the circle. Further, “Song of the Son” has to be immediately

followed by “Georgia Dusk,” another nocturnal “vesper,” this one ordered by the flight of poetry from the workday into “the footpaths of the swamp”:

Smoke from the pyramidal sawdust pile  
    Curls up, blue ghosts of trees, tarrying low  
    Where only chips and stumps are left to show  
The solid proof of former domicile.

Meanwhile, the men, with vestiges of pomp,  
    Race memories of king and caravan,  
    High-priests, an ostrich, and a juju-man  
Go singing through the footpaths of the swamp.

Their voices rise . . . the pine trees are guitars,  
    Strumming, pine-needles fall like sheets of rain . . .  
    Their voices rise . . . the chorus of the cane  
Is caroling a vesper to the stars . . .

(17)

That pivotal sawdust pile is the same one encountered in “Karintha,” which substitutes extractive industry for biological reproduction: “But Karintha is a woman, and she has had a child. A child fell out of her womb onto a bed of pine-needles in the forest. Pine-needles are smooth and sweet. They are elastic to the feet of rabbits . . . A sawmill was nearby. Its pyramidal sawdust pile smouldered. It is a year before one completely burns” (6). Reappearing in “Georgia Dusk,” the sawdust pile’s gothic half-life extends farther, its pyramidal shape invoking Egyptian pyramids to superimpose twentieth-century industry and ancient world slavery. In this respect it achieves a similar kind of figural density to “the singing tree” of “Song of the Son,” compressing the contradictory unity between modern industry and apparently pre-modern social forms into a single image of the contemporary social world remade by the expanding material force of industrial capital. In this rendition of *Cane*’s dusks, though, when wage-laborers bear the ghostly images of their ancestors and would-be lynchings appear in the guise of slave catchers, the poet catches sight of a line that departs from the vertical axis of earth and sky and instead recedes into the depth of landscape. “Go[ing] singing through the footpaths of the swamp,” the troop of singers moves out of



reach of their pursuers, the “feast of moon and men and barking hounds” (17). Indeed, where the singers go even the poet cannot follow. Where in Whitman we would get a long italicized ventriloquization of the song the singers sing, here we only get broken impressions of the music as it reaches back to the poet over the tops of trees. Far from a defeat, however, this departure brings one of the few celebratory moments in all of *Cane*. As the poet’s material source escapes into the swamp, poetry moves into prose.

Toomer naming “Harvest Song” as the point of rest in the circular movement of *Cane* can key us into a broader tendency in the book’s alternating motions: in *Cane*, poetry doesn’t so much dissolve as it marks temporary waypoints where thematic and figural roads momentarily combine. It is not an outlet or an “alighting,” per se, but it may be a cross-roads and a potential resting point, a place where the uneven topographies of contemporary development—“from the South up into the North, and back into the South again. Or, from the North down into the South, and then a return North”—can be gathered into temporary emblems of survival and response.

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It’s telling that Toomer only offers this option for reading *Cane* to Frank, his “brother” and the one reader who “not only understand[s] CANE,” but “is *in* it, specifically here and there, mystically because of the spiritual bond there is between us.”<sup>44</sup> Insofar as Toomer’s “spiritual” development in the *Cane* years had become bound up with his friendship with the older Frank, this alternate order is also a means of further recognizing a transformative artistic and personal intimacy. His keeping the “spiritual” *Cane* implicit, however, is also a means of protecting that intimacy.

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<sup>44</sup> Toomer to Frank, early to mid-January 1923, in *Cane* 165.

But I want to let this question of audience go, as I do too any hint of a claim that this is how *Cane* ought to be read. Rather, I want to suggest that, regardless of what order we read the book in, this letter and its alternative map of *Cane* indicate something important about *Cane*'s poetry and its disposition to prose that often gets overlooked, which is that poetry in *Cane* always comes *after* prose, but is also always surrounded by prose. That afterness gives it a certain privilege—a *post festum* perspective from which it can take stock—but its surroundedness also means that it's never autonomous. Rather than feeling this to be tragic—as a foreclosure of lyric, say—Toomer renders poetry's non-autonomy part of the very consolation promised by prosimetrum: that these are time-bound forms, adequate to the indeterminately long interval of a contemporary reality whose unevenness exceeds the scope of any single occasion, or any single poem.

## CHAPTER 3

### SUBURBAN LIKENESSES: JAMES SCHUYLER'S POETICS OF GETTING BY

The world of James Schuyler's poetry is far from that of Jean Toomer's, to say the least: the New York of the New York School is a far cry from the New York of the Lost Generation and Harlem Renaissance. Indeed, although similar in magnitude to the gap between Chapters 1 and 2, the distance covered here in the leap from Toomer to Schuyler—from the 1920s to the 1960s—certainly *feels* greater. No doubt this has to do in part with the fact that Schuyler and Toomer write from such vastly different experiences of American life, even as they share certain poetic inclinations (toward Whitman, Hart Crane, and the French symbolists, for instance). More acutely, though, Toomer's Jim Crow and Whitman's Secession Crisis appear continuous in a way that Schuyler's postwar and Toomer's interwar do not. Standing between the New York avant-gardes that Toomer and Schuyler each called home—and between the two halves of this dissertation—in other words, is the social and economic turning point of midcentury.

The America that emerged from the Great Depression and World War II was an America definitively transformed, recast by wartime industrial mobilization and newly positioned as the leader of both a new global political order and a new cycle of global capitalist accumulation, both of which were minted by the new reserve status of the dollar. There are many ways to narrate this transformation, be it in terms of technological innovation, labor compromise, or systemic transition.<sup>1</sup> For this dissertation, the salient dynamics lie once again in the spatial and developmental contours of class recomposition. The tremendous asymmetries between an agrarian

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Robert J. Gordon, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2016); Arrighi; and *The Golden Age of Capitalism*.

world in crisis and a booming urban economy that troubled Toomer had been gradually and painfully sublimated in the dramatic consolidation of large-scale industry from the mid-30s on, as the American corporation and workforce alike were definitively reorganized around vertical integration and the industrial wage. Depression-era concessions by capital and labor alike—the right to form a union, the promise not to strike—were ensconced by postwar compromises that tied steady wage gains to open shops, at once stabilizing production costs for the complex large durables underwriting economic growth and dispelling rising tensions among a rank-and-file that was expanded and momentarily diversified by the war economy.<sup>2</sup> On and off the shop floor, in other words, labor for Americans after the war had changed, yielding a widely marketed image of the good life defined by routine work, a steady wage, and a single-family home. As contemporary commentators noted, the complex new production processes, cross-industry national unions, and the high final price tag of cars and dishwashers drove an expanding white-collar service sector of professionals, experts, and managers, as well as low-wage, often flexible and feminized service workers—typists, stewardesses, draftsmen, janitors, and so on.<sup>3</sup>

Although the watchword for this postwar order was American exceptionalism, its arrangements were far from natural or inevitable. Labor peace and high growth rates relied on a structurally unsustainable pattern of rising wages and rising productivity which the federal government was now charged with maintaining. Capital turned both to defense contracts and an array of “spatial fixes” in order to feed demand for cars, houses, and the domestic appliances that came with them (at a surcharge). Domestically, the G.I. Bill of 1944, the 1954 move to “accelerated depreciation”—a large implicit tax break for developers aimed at keeping the postwar

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<sup>2</sup> Louis Hyman offers a concise recent overview of these changes from the perspective in *Temp: How American Work, American Business, and the American Dream Became Temporary* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998); and C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford UP, 2002).

economy hot—and the Interstate Highway Act of 1956 underwrote a decade of unprecedented new home construction to fuel growth, transforming greenfields into speculative “sitcom suburbs” for white families, blue- and white-collar alike.<sup>4</sup> Abroad, the Marshall Plan and the Green Revolution drove modernization projects that pulled millions of people out of subsistence agriculture and rebuilt war-torn economies into new markets (and future competitors) for American industry. If for the first time in American history wages were at a such a level that American workers could buy back a growing portion of their product, they secured that privilege at the expense of colonized subjects abroad and racialized and feminized workers at home, now consigned again to houses, offices, restaurants, and fields. As early as the mid-to-late 50s, meanwhile, signs of underlying contradictions were beginning to show in core industries like auto manufacturing, where high profit rates made possible by early technical advantages were already beginning to face headwinds from international competition that U.S. capital itself had made possible.<sup>5</sup> By the late 60s and early 70s, even a permanent war economy could not forestall a deep crisis in production, the only answer to which was to begin slowly undoing the midcentury compacts of the golden age.

Such epochal patterns of struggle and change might seem out of proportion for reading James Schuyler, whose outermost frame of reference is often the single day. Lauded by his friend Barbara Guest as “the Vuillard of us” thanks to his writerly intimacy and quietly patterned still lifes, Schuyler is rightly admired for the delicacy of his poetic regard.<sup>6</sup> He was also well known to admire art that skirts the complications of political commitment or social concern. And yet, while Schuyler kept a practiced distance from the shifting historical tectonics around him, he was often keenly attentive to their pressures. Though renowned as a founding member of the so-called New York

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<sup>4</sup> See Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> The standard account is Brenner’s in *The Economics of Global Turbulence*.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Guest, “The Vuillard of Us,” *Denver Quarterly* 24.4 (1990): 13-16.

School of poetry, for instance, he also wrote three suburban novels whose farcical yet affectionate portraiture speaks to an abiding interest in emerging postwar restructurings and their influence on American life and language. Like his two more widely read friends—John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara—Schuyler deployed a camp sensibility that can both delight in and shudder from the increasing resemblance between history and pop.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Ashbery and O’Hara find themselves drawn in one way or another to the vicissitudes of capitalist crisis and the service economy, however, Schuyler’s life and work directs our attention elsewhere.

Schuyler’s career offers one way of tracking the long outro of a world in which broad economic expansion could still make room for versions of bohemian life lived at a distance from the wage. Schuyler left the formal workforce in 1961, after 6 years of part-time curatorial work at MoMA. For the rest of his life he relied on a combination of free-lance art writing, a smattering of grants, and the care of his friends, beset by periodic, yet severe psychological troubles that left him institutionalized a number of times across the late 60s and 70s. Shut out from the world of the professional poet as from the world of professions that could support poetic moonlighting, Schuyler passed long stints living with friends—first the painter Fairfield Porter and his family in Southampton, NY and later the poet Kenward Elmslie in Vermont—and finally settled into a series of lower Manhattan hotel and boarding rooms. Writing from the standing of his own embodiment in the world—more often than not a desk or a bed—Schuyler again and again takes up poetic positions of un- and semi-waged precarity, assuming the posture of a kind of blissful unemployability at home in city or suburb, artist’s loft or country-house. Sharing with O’Hara and Ashbery a poetic perspective at once self-consciously peripheral to capital yet attuned to the affects,

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<sup>7</sup> Recent historically minded scholarship on the New York School has elucidated this point. See Nealon, *Matter of Capital*, 73-107; Clover, “‘A Form Adequate to History’: Toward a New Marxist Poetics,” *Paideuma: Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* 37 (2010): 321-48; Bernes, 37-84; and Ngai, 53-110.

rhythms, and contradictions of white-collar service work, Schuyler is less lunch-hour flaneur or Warholian poet-manager than he is sub-tenant, or house-sitter. Far from the everyday violence of racial oppression at a moment of industrial expansion encountered in Chapter 2, in other words, Schuyler's occasion compasses the everyday routines, as pleasurable as they are uneventful, of the white-collar poet at the beginning of the American Century's long unwinding.

More particularly, this chapter argues that Schuyler develops a kind of middle style that can register the determinations of wage-dependency yet also quietly luxuriate in the pleasures of ignoring them. The middle style typically denotes a range in between the comic and the tragic, or between common vernacular and high poetic diction, and I mean something like that here, too; Schuyler routinely ping pongs between revelation and camp, sublimity and bathos.<sup>8</sup> But what I'm thinking of as Schuyler's middle style also appears more dynamically as a habit of actively mediating between high and low: Schuyler's poems frequently approach elevated poetic feeling only to recoil into low physical comedy. What's more, in his major poems from the mid-70s, the space between metaphoricity and literality that Schuyler's poems seek out also becomes, remarkably, a space between capital and the wage. Indeed, Schuyler's mediating style, I argue, comes to serve as a way for his poems to skirt the Scylla of large-scale capitalist unevenness—evident especially in the speculative redevelopment of space—and the Charybdis of everyday compulsions to reproduce life mediated by value—the need to shop for groceries.

Schuyler's term for this stylistic habit is "description," and its tell-tale sign is the word "like." That is, Schuyler's middle style leads him to a lightly analogic poetics that tarries with the minimal

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<sup>8</sup> On bathos and the sublime in Schuyler, see Geoff Ward, *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets* (New York: Palgrave, 1993), 10-35; and John Wilkinson, "Jim the Jerk: Bathos and Loveliness in the Poetry of James Schuyler," in *Bathos: Literature, Art, Music*, ed. Sara Crangle, Peter Nicholls (London: Continuum, 2010), 71-90.

likenesses it finds among disparate worldly forms—between “Fairy Soap” and ferry boats, for instance—but that can stop short of positing any abstract equivalence. At the same time, “likening” also serves Schuyler as a means of aesthetic appreciation—of liking the tangential similarities between things. “Is it for miracles / We live,” Schuyler asks at the end of one of his long poems, “Hymn to Life”; his answer is typical—demurral from the miraculous by way of scaling down, likening sunrise to artificial food coloring: “I like it when the morning sun lights up my room / Like a yellow jelly bean, an inner glow.”<sup>9</sup> This deliberately unassuming aesthetic act allows Schuyler to both posit and win distance from the miraculous, to like the way things—days, flowers, sunrises—resemble each other without their particularities getting lost in a larger whole.

“Likening,” however, also empowers Schuyler to make unlikely, tenuous connections across distinct registers of value—especially artistic and economic. Indeed, Schuyler’s middle style itself ends up producing poetic likenesses to the contemporary combined unevenness of American capital. A poem from the 1974 collection *Hymn to Life*, for instance, likens “disposable / rib cages” to “disposable / houses” in a comparison meant to console:

In  
fields rise  
as of them-  
selves, houses.  
Don’t ‘tsk  
tsk’ men and  
habitations  
are nature  
too in waves  
of concourse  
disposable  
cities give  
a sense  
of certainty.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> James Schuyler, “Hymn to Life,” in *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993), 223.

<sup>10</sup> Schuyler, “Buttered Greens,” in *Collected Poems*, 172-73.



The poem goes on to suggestively revalue a place like Levittown by likening the supposedly ugly similarity between the houses to natural patterns:

“But! All  
alike! How  
Levittown!”  
Why not  
alike as  
leaves<sup>11</sup>

Like people and leaves, cities and suburbs also die, even if they obey a different seasonality. For a poet who was raised in the suburbs, whose poetic reputation is primarily built on his connections to New York City, and who spent much of his adult life getting by month to month in low-rent apartments or other people’s homes, poetic form and the human body alike come oddly to resemble “the body / of a house”—sufficient, if temporary shelter.<sup>12</sup>

Tracking moments such as this—which abound—I argue that Schuyler makes occasions out of small-scale moments of transformation in poetic value—of transfer from the literal to the figurative and back—without definitively leaving the ground of the immediate. Ordinary events—a sunset, a dinner out with friends—become occasions to find a middling relation to life and personhood that can both value them and abide their passing. Focusing especially on Schuyler’s poetry from the mid-70s and collected in his Pulitzer-Prize winning volume, *Morning of the Poem* (1980), I show how Schuyler’s suburban likenesses allow him, through elegy and pastoral, to take in and then, more importantly, let go of the large-scale movements of capital, as an unfolding crisis in profitability begins to remap the built environment and social life alike.

## 1. VALUE, DESCRIPTION, AND SCHUYLER’S MIDDLE STYLE

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<sup>11</sup> Schuyler, “Buttered Greens,” 173.

<sup>12</sup> Schuyler, “Buttered Greens,” 175.

In his synoptic early study of the principal New York School poets, David Lehman offers what has become the consensus snapshot of Schuyler's poetry: "Like [Fairfield] Porter, Schuyler operated on the principle that the best criticism is simply the best description. Like few other poets, he committed himself to the task of painting what's there and only what's there. In his poems accuracy of observation is raised to a high form of praise. The natural or manmade particulars of the world are celebrated not so much for their utility as for their virtue in merely being."<sup>13</sup> "Description," "observation," and "merely being" have become watchwords for readers of Schuyler since. And with some reason. But the emphasis on mereness in Lehman's characterization, on "painting what's there and only what's there," is also easily over-stated, opening up ways of reading Schuyler as a poet of thingly matter and a recessive, quietly anti-humanist skepticism, which arguably obscure key features of his poetry.<sup>14</sup> This is because describing in Schuyler is never self-sufficient, never disconnected from something like valuing, as Lehman's connection between observation and praise indicates in passing.

Indeed, while Schuyler wrote very little either formally or informally about his own poetry, his critical descriptions of his friends' work in his letters and art writing give clear impressions of his commitments at the level of poetics.<sup>15</sup> In his longest essay on Porter's painting in *ARTnews*, from 1967, Schuyler thinks at length about the relationship among art, value, and class in order to defend Porter's (and by analogy his own) descriptive style, so out of step with the avant-garde currents of minimalism and conceptualism. The first sentence of the essay is telling: "A critic who

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<sup>13</sup> David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 273.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Andrew Epstein, *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> The "statement on poetics" that Schuyler submitted for Donald Allen's movement-defining 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry* speaks only of his peers and then only to say that they have mostly taken inspiration from contemporary painters. "If you try to derive a strictly literary ancestry for New York poetry," he concludes, "the main connection gets missed" (James Schuyler, "Poet and Painter Overture," in *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* [Berkeley: U of California P, 1999], 419).

found nothing to like (in fact, the contrary) in an exhibition of Fairfield Porter's paintings summed up his feelings about them in the epithet 'bourgeois.'"<sup>16</sup> To describe Porter's paintings as "bourgeois," and to dislike them on this account, seems to Schuyler both erroneous and tautological. Tautological because, as Schuyler sees it, "[i]f art in America can be identified with a class, it is hard to see what other kind than middle-class [the critic] had expected to find," and erroneous because it flattens the actual distance that Schuyler sees between art and production ("Aspect," 9). Schuyler appeals to Rosa Luxemburg and E. P. Thompson to make these points, suggesting first that Porter's experience in left communist circles in 1930s Chicago led him to a position that "somewhat resembles" the one ascribed to Luxemburg by her biographer—that "[a]s a means of social change [Rosa Luxembourg] preferred direct political activity" ("Aspect, 12," quoting J. P. Nettl). Then, at the end of the essay, Schuyler suggests that the aesthetic values of Porter's painting practice cannot be identified with class because they do not exist in an "an active relation to production" ("Aspects," 16, quoting Thompson).

Instead, Schuyler argues, the paintings—in their self-sufficiency as paintings—embody an "attitude toward life":

What is seen is that out of the exteriors of things an image of life can be created: that a field is man-made and is made of dirt, that houses have the same wooden life as trees, and that their shapes complement each other: the hard and sinuous, the sloped and chunky. And the air has substance. It is the act of painting that has spread these different kinds of life on a flat surface, pulled and pushed them together until they make a fact as natural as a flaw of quartz in rock ("Aspect," 16).

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<sup>16</sup> James Schuyler, "An Aspect of Fairfield Porter's Paintings," in *Selected Art Writings*, ed. Simon Pettet (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1998), 8. Hereafter abbreviated "Aspect" and cited parenthetically by page number.

Description in this respect serves as a way of enacting human-nonhuman metabolism at the scale of “concentrated instances.” Strikingly, Schuyler associates such an approach with a “distrust of idealism,” which he identifies explicitly with Stalinism and implicitly with a Greenbergian conception of art history as a linear path of increasing abstraction. Both would mean imposing a set of values without regard for “what people are actually like,” be it in their actual relationships to production or in the ways they actually make art (“Aspect,” 11). To dislike Porter because his paintings are “bourgeois,” Schuyler suggests, smacks of an idealism unsuited to either social critique or art criticism. Porter’s paintings, rather, arrange values on the terms of their own processual mediation of the world: “He likes a coherent, unmuddy, close adjustment of values, such as he found in Fra Angelico and in de Kooning: an adjustment in which colors affect one another within the picture, and give it the fullness of range (the light within the room, the light outside the window)” (“Aspects,” 14).

I’ll want to return to this distinction between the internal value relations of a painting and art’s relationship to capitalist value production in a moment. First, however, it bears adding that what distinguishes Porter’s painting further for Schuyler is its tone, for here we draw closer to Schuyler’s own practice. Porter, Schuyler concludes, gives us “an aspect of everyday life, *seen neither as a snapshot nor as an exaltation*. Its art is one that values the everyday as the ultimate, the most varied and desirable knowledge” (“Aspects,” 16, emphasis added). Description “values the everyday” as the ultimate value, but in that valuing it is neither documentary nor exaltation—neither low nor high, we might say, neither completely literal nor figurative. Indeed, while he does not give a name for what lies between those two poles, that neither/nor is the tell-tale of Schuyler’s middle style.

Before showing Schuyler’s middle style in action, I want to indicate the neither-snapshot-nor-exaltation quality that Schuyler sees in Porter’s painting, because I think this can serve as a

useful visual background for Schuyler's poetry. In Porter's *The Screen Porch* (1964), for instance, Porter's wife, two children, and long-term boarder (Schuyler himself), are posed, together and apart, in the porch of Porter's vacation house in Great Spruce Head Island, Maine. Strikingly, Porter's wife, Anne, is outside of the porch and squeezed against the edge of the canvas, a position which heightens the sense of separation prevailing in the scene. The other figures, indeed, seem at once vacant and absorbed—though not with each other—and more staged than found. As one follows the painterly description of body and color finding relation, one senses the things that Schuyler likes about Porter—the discovery of “the same wooden life” of the birches outside and the



Figure 1. Fairfield Porter, “The Screen Porch” (1964), Whitney Museum of Art, Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest, The Estate of Fairfield Porter/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, NY

framing porch structure, for instance, and, especially, the active subtraction of mood from the scene. “It is the introduction of mood,” Schuyler writes, “that drains so much nineteenth-century American painting of its vitality” (“Aspect,” 15). To think like Schuyler, the painting does not portray bourgeois life on vacation. It enacts an orientation toward the ordinary at a particular place and time, through which the painter relinquishes his human subjects into a middle ground between portraiture and landscape that feels intimate even as personality recedes from the figures themselves and into the material facts of the painting.

Schuyler is a master of this middle ground, which is frequently rendered both perspectivally and tonally. Here's a typical example of one of Schuyler's "skinny poems"; occasioned by sunset, it offers a paradigmatic rendition of Schuylerian description and helps to clarify its own values:

"Dec. 28, 1974"

The plants against the light  
which shines in (it's four o'clock)  
right on my chair: I'm in my chair:  
are silhouettes, barely green,  
growing black as my eyes move right,  
right to where the sun is.  
I am blinded by a fiery circle:  
I can't see what I write. A man  
comes down iron stairs (I  
don't look up) and picks up brushes  
which, against a sonata of Scriabin's,  
rattle like wind in a bamboo clump.  
A wooden sound, and purposeful footsteps  
softened by a drop-cloth-covered floor.  
To be encubed in flaming splendor,  
one foot on a Chinese rug, while  
the mad emotive music  
tears at my heart.<sup>17</sup>

The motor of this poem is the rhythm of its short declarative clauses, which, while always retaining their syntactic integrity, turn and skip around the counter-force of the poem's irregular line-breaks. Additionally, the moment of description in this poem is gradually made contiguous with the poetic act of inscription, so that the poetic "I" tracking the play of afternoon light against plants at a certain point merges with the writing "I" who is suddenly blinded when that momentum brings him eye-to-eye with the sun. That contiguity (as so often in Schuyler) is quietly self-deflating, so that the figure of the blind visionary poet is both invoked and ironically brought down by the banal literality of the image of the poet inadvertently caught blinking at the sun. This is only a touch of irony,

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<sup>17</sup> Schuyler, "Dec. 28, 1974," in *Collected Poems*, 233. Hereafter cited parenthetically by title.

though, which is almost forgotten by the time we get to mystical sonatas and the descent of haloed bodies, “encubed in flaming splendor.” Indeed, out of that quiet initial movement of bathos, we suddenly get the emotive sincerity of a plea: that “To be” of the final sentence of this opening movement that momentarily but decisively breaks the neutral indicative mood of the passage, and, in so doing, opens a moment of “mad emotive” transport relinquished almost as soon as it is registered.

This sequence of moves is important to emphasize because in it we can begin to see the difficulty in reading Schuyler’s poetry in terms of “what’s there and only what’s there.” Indeed, the second half of the poem turns on an enticing, but ambiguous invocation of “things / as they are”:

“Your poems,”  
a clunkhead said, “have grown  
more open.” I don’t want to be open,  
merely to say, to see and say, things  
as they are.

Although in an earlier poem Schuyler expresses an embracing calm precisely in accepting “things as they are, even the things you don’t like,” in this poem the same apparent citation of a worldly facticity is anything but straightforward.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, “see[ing] and say[ing] things / as they are” is precisely what this poem *does not* do. This poem neither “sees”—intentionally blinded by looking directly at the sun—nor “says”:

Still, last night I did wish—  
no, that’s my business and I  
don’t wish it now.

It hears and it feels, certainly, but sight and speech are the two faculties explicitly denied the poetic voice, even as it goes on to enumerate the things it would see and say as they are (fields, sparrows, a wicker chair, each “palely brown yet with an inward glow / like that of someone of a frank good

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<sup>18</sup> Schuyler, “A Vermont Diary,” in *Collected Poems*, 108.

nature / whom you trust" ("Dec. 28, 1974," 234). Rather, the poem revolves around its own "close adjustment of values," through which the plants go from barely green to black, and the brushes conspire with Scriabin to sound like bamboo and then like the "wooden sound" of the unseen painter. These lateral moves across color, form, and sensation lead Schuyler to that complex "don't want," that double-move of transfiguration and blindness, desire and withholding, which is not so much ineffable as it is non-linguistic, or, in other words, musical and figural:

I want to hear the music  
hanging in the air and drink my  
Coca-Cola. The sun is off me now,  
the sky begins to color up, the air  
in here is filled with wildly flying notes.  
Yes, the sun moves off to the right  
and prepares to sink, setting,  
beyond the dunes, an ocean on fire.  
("Dec. 28, 1974," 234)

Instead of "things as they are," we get the obscurities of feeling set to the micro-rhythms of day; we get the visual absence of "a man"—friend and/or lover the poem doesn't specify—wanted and not, the sound of his unseen figure displaced onto the pyrotechnics of sunset.

Like in Porter's painting, Schuyler's coordination of the density of ordinary perception with the complexity of a feeling—here caught between the coolness of recognition and the heat of wanting (or having wanted) things otherwise—moves toward the demarcation of a multi-dimensional and affectively ambiguous middle perspective: the poet planted in his chair marks the perpendicular midpoint in the horizontal passage of the sun from left to right, as he does too along the vertical axis between the "drop-cloth-covered floor" and the "man / com[ing] down the stairs."<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, the poem itself seeks the level between the bathos of literality and the pathos of poetic figure. The desire for the moment's consummation in time's fullness, for instance—"to hear the

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<sup>19</sup> Thanks to Chris Westcott for conversations that made this operation clearer to me.



music / hanging in the air”—is immediately mixed with ad copy—“and drink my / Coca-Cola.” Strikingly, though, the poem’s final note is metaphor. The last half-line retrospectively revalues “setting” as a transitive verb, enlivening its colloquial metaphoricity into something apocalyptic: the sun is not just setting, it’s “setting / [. . .] an ocean on fire.” But Schuyler’s view, returning slowly after seeing sunspots, is once again obstructed. The day and its poem, “Dec. 28, 1974,” hang between transfiguration and camp, which also happens to be the position of the poet—braced between the dailiness of a sunset and the shadow of a December ecliptic.

“Description” names this see-saw of transvaluation, which tends toward a middleness anchored by the poet’s own body. That anchor keeps the poem from following too far the implications of its own metaphors. Indeed, in a reading of Schuyler’s early poem, “February,” Jeff Dolven notices this same tendency and, stunningly, narrates Schuyler’s style as a hedge against Auerbachian *figura*, or “the temptation to bridge two moments in time in such a way as to remember and experience them both, and to find between them a relation of anticipation and fulfillment.”<sup>20</sup> Always leading up to the potential of transport, be it through memory or metaphor, Schuyler retreats into lower-grade similarities—likenesses—between moments in time or feelings and history. As Dolven suggests, this stylistic habit allows Schuyler to access a non-apocalyptic sense of time—and, I would add, the occasion—that replaces the consolation of a past or future ending with the consolation of new days, “each so unique, each so alike.”<sup>21</sup> Sometimes, as in “Dec. 28, 1974,” Schuyler ends up flying closer to the sun, but mostly his poetry is interested in tracing the mediations of its own position in the world.

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<sup>20</sup> Jeff Dolven, “Leap Year,” *ELH* 84.2 (2017): 372. It was a happy surprise to catch this essay as an Associate Editor at *ELH* during my own research on Schuyler. Dolven’s essay—a version of an English Institute talk on “Figure”—verified and crystallized what I had begun to think through as Schuyler’s middleness.

<sup>21</sup> Schuyler, “Hymn to Life,” 223.

In the rest of this chapter, I'm going to argue that two of Schuyler's major poems from the mid-1970s, "Dining Out with Doug and Frank" and "Morning of the Poem," test the capacity of the descriptive poet to maintain his distance from the encroaching determinations of capitalist crisis. But first, I want to glance once more at Schuyler's 1967 essay on Porter to clarify why description may have been suited to this problem all along. In the reading I've been developing here, description for Schuyler does not indicate the literality of the world in its "mere[] being," but rather a stylistic fidelity to the movements entrained in its artistic mediation. Tellingly, Schuyler poses this style in light of but also beyond the reach of the determinations of value-production expressed in and through class. Thus, while the "values [of description] are no more timeless than anything else," Schuyler concludes, neither are they restricted to a given social form; "they are values that exist in any given society, whether they are embodied or not. Their concern is with immediacy: 'Look *now*. It will never be more interesting'" ("Aspect, 16-17). In contrast to the idealism that says art made under certain conditions must look a certain way, Schuyler gestures toward a view of artistic mediation as at once immanent to social life yet not fully determined by any of its historical forms of appearance.

Schuyler's construal of art and value thereby sets him apart from contemporaries whose experiments were aimed at either trying to keep pace with or critique the transformations to postwar production.<sup>22</sup> The tacit seriality of Schuyler's poetry, like that of Porter's figurative painting, is different than the seriality of conceptualist manufacturing in either Andy Warhol or Carl Andre, for instance (the latter of whom gets a wonderfully snarky dismissal in Schuyler's essay).<sup>23</sup> Its repetitiveness—its style—resembles the dailiness of the self's and the world's reproduction. There is

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<sup>22</sup> See Bernes; and Daniel Spaulding, "Value-Form and Avant-Garde," *Metamute*, 27 March 2014, <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/value-form-and-avant-garde>, accessed 5/9/2020.

<sup>23</sup> See Chris Westcott, "Makeshift Solutions: Serial Poetry and Secular Stagnation, 1965 to Today" (PhD Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2017).

labor in that too, of course, but Schuyler's relative autonomy from the wage relation, precarious though it be, allows him to see it primarily in aesthetic terms. Indeed, description offers Schuyler a rhetorical orientation to the present at a distance from production altogether.

Curiously, at key moments in his essay on Porter, that distance gets expressed in an imagination of the built environment as an uneven distribution of aesthetic possibility. In a passage that will resound over the following chapter as well, Schuyler takes an imaginary survey of Harlem in order to illustrate description's mimetic opacity:

Coming into New York City on the New York Central the train passes through Harlem. In the midst of the slums rise red brick housing developments, squat and tall. They are indeed prison-like, and it is almost impossible to see them for what they are: stacks of dwellings where people lead lives as varied as we know them to be. It is one thing knowing that to live in an ugly building is not to lead an ugly life, and another to believe it when faced with what look like machines to die in. Seen at another time, the buildings may look quite different: at dusk, when the lights come on, they may seem castles of hard-won privacy. Both are illusions. The buildings are esthetic flops, the people who live in them are the ones who look at them least, and about them we know little or nothing ("Aspect," 15).

Schuyler's point here is hard to untangle. He is trying to neutralize the charge that Porter's painting is illusionistic by arguing that the real is no more or less illusionistic than the art object; the painting "fix[es] our attention on what is there, in the painting," Schuyler insists, which is "remarkably unreal," even if seemingly representational ("Aspect," 15, 16). Similarly, the high-rises of Harlem are no more easily or stably seen. The challenge would be to give them a reality in description that is shaded by neither the tragic mode of noble suffering nor the heroic mode of "hard-won"

nobility. Only description's middle style can approach seeing them, "prison-like" "stacks of dwellings" that they are, where people lead complicated lives.

What I'm especially interested in here, though, is that in trying to figure out how to articulate the relationship between art and value, Schuyler turns to the built environment and to housing, in particular. Porter paints farmhouses, not skyscrapers, but in any case his work "is not a statement," Schuyler writes, "nor are we invited to prefer a rural life to an urban, or a house to an apartment"; it is not an image of the good life but "an attitude toward life" in general ("Aspect," 16). Yet this rhetorical middleness only makes sense against a deep, uneven social background in which production itself is beginning to seem less immediately present, in turn making apparent new cracks in the organization of American life according to capitalist value, such as the simultaneous distance and proximity between a house in the country and an apartment in Harlem.

Description's understated style, in this respect, signifies in part as a way of relating aesthetic to economic value while finally keeping one's distance from the latter's determinations. If this position is not "bourgeois," it does lean into a lightly classed and gendered middleness that can turn its relation to certain conditions of survival under capital—the wage, the family, the house—into the very stuff of its art. Over the rest of this chapter, we're going to see Schuyler's poetry pay direct attention to those conditions as they begin to be reorganized across the 1970s. Indeed, in key mid-70s works, the breezy yet vulnerable middle distance that Schuyler takes from the determinations of production gets palpably thrown into question with the crisis in production itself, and the position of the poet at the edges of the "middle class" finds itself threatened by the spatial recomposition of class in general. In showing how Schuyler continues to invite us to read the way his poems mediate artistic and non-artistic values, I'm going to suggest that his middle style becomes a privileged tool for imagining new forms of consolation in light of the combined unevenness of American life being once more recomposed by capitalist crisis.

## 2. *THE MORNING OF THE POEM* IN THE AUTUMN OF THE SYSTEM

The consistency of Schuyler's style makes his books porous containers. Though each one is anchored by a distinctive, long title poem, Schuyler's work modulates more than it grows or transforms, oriented though never quite structured by the contours of Schuyler's life rather than formal or poetic ambition. Schuyler's Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, *The Morning of the Poem* (1980) collects the work of a productive, yet tumultuous period in Schuyler's life across the 1970s: in 1973, his tight but stormy relationship with the Porter family ended in his definitive departure from their home; over the years that followed, he was institutionalized several times for nervous breakdowns, bouncing around Manhattan apartments, nursing homes, and his mother's house in East Aurora, New York, until he finally settled into a long-term situation at the Chelsea Hotel from 1979 on.<sup>24</sup> There, in declining health but with a new stability, he continued to be a fixture for younger poets and artists coming to New York, and he managed to win a series of grants and prizes on the back of his Pulitzer, including a fellowship from the American Academy of Poets in 1983.

*The Morning of the Poem* stands out in part for bearing some of the marks of Schuyler's mid-70s travails. The sequence of "Payne Whitney Poems," for instance, are both more subdued and rawer than Schuyler's standards, written from the Upper East Side psychiatric ward during a period of convalescence.

"Trip"

Wigging in, wiggling out:  
when I stop to think  
the wires in my head  
cross: kaboom. How  
many trips  
by ambulance (five,

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<sup>24</sup> See for instance the editor's note to Schuyler's 1976 letter to Anne Dunn, in Schuyler, *Just the Thing: Selected Letters of James Schuyler, 1951-1991*, ed. William Corbett (New York: Turtle Point Press, 1994), 396.

count them five),  
claustrophobic, pill addiction,  
in and out of mental  
hospitals,  
the suicidalness (once  
I almost made it)  
but—I go on?  
Tell you all of it?  
I can't. When I think  
of that, that at  
only fifty-one I,  
Jim the Jerk, am  
still alive and breathing  
deeply, that I think  
is a miracle.<sup>25</sup>

The major poems in the collection, “Dining Out with Doug and Frank” and “The Morning of the Poem,” return to a more familiar range for Schuyler, moving between poles of snapshot and exaltation. But they also turn to a wider social world than much of Schuyler’s poetry. In particular, in ways familiar from his essay on Porter, “Dining Out” and “The Morning of the Poem” come to involve the built environment of downtown Manhattan and a Western New York suburb, respectively, which the descriptive poet can’t help but see in light of a contemporaneous economic downturn already beginning to transform the possibilities for survival among the kinds of artistic coterie made possible by American capital’s postwar golden age. Indeed, these poems bear a tenderness carried over from the “Payne Whitney Poems” that render the pungent frankness of Schuyler’s typical treatments of death and regeneration somehow more concrete. The personal and physical precarity felt so acutely in the “Payne Whitney Poems” eases in intensity but also seems to expand in scope

In “Dining Out with Doug and Frank,” Schuyler’s practiced middle style comes to describe a historically grounded sense of poetic and human contingency ordered by the wage-relation circa

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<sup>25</sup> Schuyler, “Trip,” in *Collected Poems*, 252.

1973—of the relation, across almost impossible scales, among financial circulation, industrial decline, and keeping oneself fed. Indeed, what announces itself as a coterie occasional poem quickly reveals itself to be an elegy both personal and social in scope. Instead of the commemoration of a minor social event, the poem begins with the strange alignment of material obsolescence and the death of intimate friends. Here are the opening lines:

Not quite yet. First,  
around the corner for a visit  
to the Bella Landauer Collection  
of printed ephemera:  
luscious lithos and why did  
Fairy Soap vanish and  
Crouch and Fitzgerald survive?  
Fairy Soap was once a  
household word! I've been living  
at Broadway and West 74<sup>th</sup>  
for a week and still haven't  
ventured on a stroll in  
Central Park, two bizarre blocks  
away. [. . .]  
My abstention from the Park  
is for Billy Nichols who went  
bird-watching there and, for  
his binoculars, got his  
head beat in.<sup>26</sup>

This is characteristic Schuyler, working sleights of hand that can turn and skip around registers at will, whereby seemingly neutral observation suddenly gets charged with significance before being just as quickly drained of it. The poem switches back on itself at a somewhat dizzying clip in this opening section: artistic ephemera almost immediately turn into the ephemerality of consumer goods, however delightfully named, whose household ubiquity lead Schuyler back to his house, whose spatial proximity to the park brings the frailty of human life up close. For those keeping count, that's the relative valueless-ness of mass-produced art to the relative valueless-ness of human

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<sup>26</sup> Schuyler, "Dining Out with Doug and Frank," in *Collected Poems*, 244-245. Hereafter abbreviated "Dining Out" and cited parenthetically by page number.

life (exchangeable for binoculars) in five moves. As ever, the tone sits in a recognizable band that is neither critical nor tragic, but something else—something less brittle. Over the rest of the poem, that itinerary and its thematic puns—on survival, transaction, and destruction—will repeat again and again in various sequences, as the city, the human body, and the stuff that keeps it alive all dos-à-dos.

Indeed, across its perambulations—down from Central Park to the Chelsea waterfront, up and down both the East River and the Hudson—the poem becomes a sort of unassuming elegy for Manhattan in a moment when the idea of the city’s death had become something of a master trope for both the urban crisis and the larger mid-70s economic malaise. And that for good reason: New York’s trajectory over the 60s and 70s was dramatic. A decade of suburbanization and white flight had significantly eroded the city’s industrial and tax base, as American capital first fled South and West (and then more and more overseas) chasing lower labor costs and government defense contracts in the context of rising competition over market share and profit margins. Within the region, meanwhile, the share of commuting workers grew by as much as 30 percent over the 1960s along with a rising service sector made up of a diverse mix of unionized blue-collar public service jobs and white-collar jobs in private finance and tourism. As labor and capital left the city, falling profits and rising unemployment drove an exploding public welfare system, whose budget grew by as much as 560 percent in the decade between 1962 and 1972.<sup>27</sup> Such developments were not just obscure macroeconomic trends but features of everyday life and struggle, evident in everything from crumbling buildings, to riots, wildcat strikes, public bankruptcies, and so on. Meanwhile, in newspaper forums, policy reports, and Hollywood films, New York had taken on a deathly aspect,

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<sup>27</sup> See William K. Tabb, *The Long Default: New York City and the Urban Fiscal Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982), 71-80. See also Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York’s Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (New York: Picador Books, 2017).



coming to stand in not just for the collapse but the overreach of postwar social prosperity, the beginning of the end of American exceptionalism.<sup>28</sup>

In “Dining Out,” Schuyler’s middle style ends up capturing a certain likeness of capital’s contemporary unevenness in his signature poetic combination of different poetic values. Overlaying quotidian narrative, personal memory, and social life, Schuyler is able to relate distinct scales of material constraint, from the compulsion to sell one’s day all the way up to the reorganization of the built environment. In the poem’s long final section, for instance, the poet follows a train of association that runs from the restaurant where he and his friend dine to the architectural and poetic history of lower Manhattan’s Hudson waterfront to the death of Schuyler’s first lover, mapping a kind of ghostly topography of some of the poet’s former attachments in a New York City being actively reconstituted.

Consider the following sequence, which begins with a riff on the former Terminal Hotel, now home to the restaurant where the dinner in question takes place:

“Terminal,” I surmise, because  
the hotel faced the terminal  
of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Street ferry, a  
perfect sunset sail to Hoboken  
and the yummys of the Clam  
Broth House, which, thank God,  
still survives. Not many do . . .  
.....  
The river ferryboats were  
squat and low like tugs, old  
and wooden and handsome, you  
were *in* the water, *in* the shipping:  
Millay wrote a lovely poem about  
it all. I cannot accept their  
death, or any other death. Bill  
Aalto, my first lover (five tumultuous  
years found Bill chasing me around  
the kitchen table—in Wystan Auden’s

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<sup>28</sup> On the crisis’s representations in popular discourse, see Brian Tochtermann, *The Dying City: Postwar New York and the Ideology of Fear* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2017).

house in Forio d'Ischia—with  
a carving knife. He was serious  
and so was I and so I wouldn't go  
when he wanted to see me when  
he was dying of leukemia.  
(“Dining Out,” 248)

Poetically, this long passage is remarkable in part for how unassumingly it weaves together its disparate threads. The lover's appearance is previewed as early as “Terminal,” whose meaning gathers weight retrospectively with the entrance of cancer into the poem, now signifying in part as one side of a worldly River Styx, in part as a sign of the city's own many lifespans. The vehicle for that transfer are the ferryboats, which first bring back remembered poems and then bring back Schuyler's first lover, who, we eventually learn, “used / to ride [them] all the / time, doing the bars along / the waterfront” (“Dining Out,” 249). And slowly, almost imperceptibly, a series of likenesses are built up that make mourning (or choosing not to mourn) a first love comparable to mourning (or failing to mourn) the social world which that love indexed.

That open parenthesis on Schuyler's relationship with Aalto continues for a full page, as the poet likens the latter's gaunt, cancer-stricken form to the “young and handsome” man (the ferryboats were “wooden and handsome”) Schuyler first met “in Pop Tunick's long-gone gay bar” (“Dining Out,” 249). Schuyler goes on to express quiet regret at the course of his former lover's life, which, in a distant echo of Wystan Auden, seems momentarily like a regret at the shape of history:

I dream about him  
a lot, he's always the nice guy  
I first knew and loved, not  
the figure of terror he became.  
Oh well. Bill had his hour: he  
was a hero, a major in the  
Abraham Lincoln Brigade.  
(“Dining Out,” 249)

The reminder of Aalto's heroic hour completes his ambivalent portrait. Schuyler here is not lamenting his non-heroic age—he has little interest in heroics, himself—but he does seem to be pointing to—describing—a present terminus to a certain heroic logic: the heroism required by the hour of history-making (the fight against fascism) became terrible, perhaps even always was, but in a way that is itself less tragic than bathetic—though once again bathos is a site of poetic appreciation not dismissal. This personal trajectory is implicitly likened to that of the city itself: the commerce and grandeur of early twentieth-century New York is now, with the city on the brink of bankruptcy, a distant memory still partly legible in its architecture. That history of decline, meanwhile, is measured by the continuing viability of certain poetic and sexual subcultures. Central Park is now an object of terror for a lone gay man at night, “carry[ing] / more cash than [he] should and / walk[ing] the street,” and the Hudson riverfront that had once sheltered clandestine encounters is being haphazardly remade (“Dining Out,” 245). The ferries—once worthy of celebratory bohemian love poems like Edna St.-Vincent Millay's “Recuerdo”—have gone the way of Fairy Soap—“once a household name”—and with them so have the lifeways—queer and poetic—they supported.

In the poem's final turn, this expanding network of elegiac feeling for the city's bygone worlds comes to take in the large-scale movements of capital itself, as it literally remakes the built environment around the poet and his friend:

It would  
have been so nice after dinner  
to take a ferry boat with Frank  
across the Hudson (or West River,  
if you prefer). To be on  
the water in the dark and  
the wonder of electricity—  
the real beauty of Manhattan.  
Oh well. When they tore down  
the Singer Building,  
and when I saw the Bogardus building  
rusty and coming unstitched in  
a battlefield of rubble I deliberately

withdrew my emotional investments  
in loving old New York. Except  
you can't.

("Dining Out," 25)

How do you elegize a place, Schuyler's poem seems to be asking, especially a place built on the *terra liquida* of shipping routes and speculative redevelopment, a place whose social being is transformation itself? Schuyler answers this problem with a poetic liquidity that can meet the crisis-driven restructuring of the built environment with a kind of emotional double-book accounting. The occasion of shifting "investments" of capital, that is, becomes an opportunity for the poet to try and *disinvest* emotionally—from his attachments to "old New York," from the thought of friends lost. If the movements of capitalist value have undone the world the poet loved, perhaps the poem can make its own world of values flexible enough in response that mourning can be as simple as transferring attachment from one object to another. Except in the same breath—with that practiced shrug of "Oh well"—Schuyler admits that "you can't"; perhaps emotions can't, in fact, be as deliberate as capital. In that case, elegy becomes a moving record of that dissimilitude, Schuyler's middle style a stance sufficient to the strange unevenness of poetry under capital.

At dinner proper, the poem's preoccupation with survival and the peculiar flux of life in Manhattan touches down in the everyday rhythms of poetry mediated by the wage:

Now it's tomorrow,  
as usual. Turned out that  
Doug (Douglas Crase, the poet)  
had to work (he makes his bread  
writing speeches): thirty pages  
explaining why Eastman Kodak's  
semi-slump (?) is just what  
the stockholders ordered. [. . .]  
.....  
By the by did you know  
that John Ashbery's grandfather  
was offered an investment-in  
when George Eastman founded his  
great corporation? He turned it

down. Eastman Kodak will survive.  
 “Yes” and where would our  
 John be now? I can’t imagine him  
 any different than he is,  
 a problem which does not arise,  
 so I went with Frank (the poet,  
 he makes his dough as a librarian,  
 botanical librarian at Rutgers  
 and as a worker he’s a beaver:  
 up at 5:30, home after 7, but  
 over striped bass he said he  
 had begun to see the unwisdom  
 of his ways and next week will  
 revert to the seven-hour day  
 for which he is paid. Good. Time  
 and energy to write.

(“Dining Out,” 245-46)

At dinner, the poet tracks the ways (and the different scales across which) money flows, or might flow, or might have flowed, to and from poets—or white-collar workers moon-lighting as poets. Thus, in quick succession we get a series of turns in the itinerary of value: we follow the formally recognized work that will go to pay for the dinner out that the poem commemorates, which is tied to the medium-term prospects of an industrial firm shaken by recession, which decades prior had posed the possibility that John Ashbery be born a capitalist. In that case, “where [...] our / John [would] be now” might very well be among the stockholders that Doug “(the poet)” must write speeches to if he wants to “survive” to write more poems.<sup>29</sup> Thankfully, on that occasion, Ashbery the Elder “turned it / down.” Meanwhile, what “survives” this synecdochic train is the Kodak corporation, riding out its “semi-slump,” the development firm that tore down the Singer Building, and John Ashbery as we know him. Like on the waterfront, these movements of value drive the poet’s attempt to produce corollary transvaluations—jumps in time (“now it’s tomorrow / Again”), a

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<sup>29</sup> Doug “(Douglas Crase, the poet),” it turns out, would write his own “Elegy for New York,” in which “The buildings are at their stations, untimely / On the tick of property which can always assemble / To a bid” (Douglas Crase, *The Revisionist and the Astropastorals* [London: Carcanet, 2019], 31).

series of puns connecting wage-earning to dining out to doctors' orders, the recapture of time lost to work—all geared toward playfully-seriously collating the crisis' different survivors, or toward describing everyday life in what the poet-critic Joshua Clover, following Fernand Braudel, calls “the autumn of the system.”<sup>30</sup>

Cataloguing the reconstitution of urban space and the reproduction of artistic livelihood from a position of self-conscious distance from the flickering circuits of profit, “Dining Out” literalizes the image of the artist sketched nearly a decade earlier in the essay on Porter. As Doug and Frank navigate the difficulties of trying to make both poetry and bread/dough/money, our speaker finds a poetic privilege in being eminently disposable. Blessedly adjacent to the wage, Schuyler’s occasional poetics of disinvestment serves to make momentary contact between poetic and economic value while also letting the poet ruefully sidestep capital’s apocalyptic power:

I really like  
dining out and last night was  
especially fine. A full moon  
when we parted hung over  
Frank and me. Why is this poem  
so long? And full of death?  
Frank and Doug are young and  
beautiful and have nothing  
to do with that. . . . .  
. . . . .  
I’d like to take that plunge  
into Central Park, only I’m  
waiting for Darragh Park to phone.  
Oh. Doug and Frank. One is light,  
the other dark.  
Doug is the tall one.

(“Dining Out,” 250-51)

This is how the poem ends—ready to “take that plunge” for itself if it weren’t waiting to hear from a friend. From the ground of wageless life, capital, like the “full moon”—like death—swings in and out

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<sup>30</sup> See Clover, “The Autumn of the System: Poetry and Financial Capital,” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 41.1 (2011): 34-52.

of view, now blissfully absent, now suddenly overhead, remaking the built environment in its crisis-prone image, attracting and obviating “emotional investments” in the world as it (no longer) exists. Schuyler’s quotidian poetry likes to track that swing by making even minor transfers of poetic value into occasions for describing the layered weave of the present. At the same time, Schuyler builds up passing moments of intimate sociality, or even its anticipation (“waiting for Darragh Park to phone”), as the slightest bulwark against the frailty of the individual person and the world-altering power of capital.

### 3. “THE POEM LIKE / THE HOUSE FOR SALE”: THE POETICS OF GETTING BY

In this chapter, I have been arguing that occasionality in Schuyler’s poetry serves the rhetorical function of orienting poet and reader toward the relationship of artistic to social value at a particular place and time. Or at particular places and times: because the occasion is quotidian in scope, Schuyler’s poems are, like the days, singular but non-exhaustive. Each day brings its own occasions and so its own demand for poems, a situation that lends itself to the looseness of a style that can give form by merely being in attendance. In an early letter to Porter, Schuyler remarks that he “hate[s] all those dusty-answer poems about how someone or something is as pretty as a peach but after a while it’s going to be all awful looking.”<sup>31</sup> In his poetry, Schuyler instantiates a moving alternative to those tendencies to ontologize the value of poetry in its melancholic stand against time and its supposed degradations. Instead, Schuyler’s poems repeatedly work toward a sense of ease in the temporal, finding their footing in a dailiness that would skirt both the tragic and the sublime.

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<sup>31</sup> Schuyler to Fairfield Porter, 7 July 1956, in *Selected Letters*, 43.

In “Dining Out with Doug and Frank,” this occasional disposition affords the poet a way of relating poetry directly to the movements of capital as it reshapes the urban and social fabric of Manhattan. In its shape as elegy, Schuyler’s middle style imagines consolation in a poetic marginality to value that comes to resemble a kind of human buoyancy; describing the passing of a social world paved over by capital, like describing the passing of a life lived in and out of history, like commemorating a dinner out interrupted by work, fills out a poetic interval of survival that can—with the help of friends—ride out the vicissitudes of life under capital. I want to close this chapter by briefly tracing how a similar set of concerns take shape in the magisterial title poem to Schuyler’s 1980 volume, which leaves Manhattan for the suburbs.

While seemingly slight, that shift in locale is everything. If it doesn’t change Schuyler’s approach—his style—it does change the problems he faces with it. Whereas the experience of urban crisis in Manhattan leads Schuyler to the problem of elegy, for instance—of how to articulate poetic value amidst the violent reconstitution of social value around it—life in the suburbs offers a different set of images and rhythms for Schuylerian description. Particularly, the routines and changes and likenesses described in “The Morning of the Poem” are slower and more expansive; whereas dining out with Doug and Frank lasts one long evening, the morning of the poem takes up an entire season or more: “today / is a year, a morning, this / Morning was a year.”<sup>32</sup> Rather than moving backward and forward from a particular itinerary in the poem’s present, the poetic attention in “Morning of the Poem” moves in great radiating arcs around a shifting but concrete center of gravity—the poet waking into and moving through a summer day in suburban Buffalo. Finally, in place of urban elegy, “The Morning of the Poem” tackles the relation between city and suburb in a long work equal parts epistle, daybook, and out-of-work suburban pastoral.

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<sup>32</sup> Schuyler, “Morning of the Poem,” in *Collected Poems*, 275



The poem is written loosely as a letter to Schuyler's friend and eventual executor, the painter Darragh Park, while Schuyler was spending a summer taking care of his ailing mother in East Aurora, New York. Starting from the dawn of an early July morning, the poem weaves recurring scenes of daily life with memories and meditations on literary history in long undulating lines that run the length of the page. The poem as a whole, meanwhile, circles around its initial morning while winding outward toward the day, the week, and the season, and yo-yo-ing back and forth between the letter-writer's East Aurora and the Chelsea of its addressee. For a different kind of poet, moving from the urban crisis reshaping Manhattan to the suburb of a deindustrializing Great Lakes city in the same book might read like critical project. For Schuyler, however, description is in history rather than about it, a position which, if it can't tell you whether you should live in an apartment or a house, can catch certain features of life in a world polarized between city and suburb.

The difference between "Dining Out" and "The Morning of the Poem" can be measured in part by the fact that what holds Schuyler's eye in the latter poem is not the Manhattan skyline or the riverfront, but the suburban house. We have already seen that the postwar suburban development held for Schuyler a bathetic likeness to natural cycles of decay and regrowth. Early in "The Morning of the Poem," Schuyler returns to this idea, as the breathless flow of poetic meditation is broken by another occasion of potential transvaluation. "The truth," Schuyler begins, at an unfamiliar pitch,

the absolute  
Of feeling, of knowing what you know, that is  
the poem, like  
The house for sale buried in a luxuriance of  
overgrown foundation planting  
Across the street upon this hill (taxus,  
cotoneaster), the doctor has more  
Patients in Buffalo: he moved there: I'd rather  
stay here and starve, well,

Sort of starve[.]<sup>33</sup>

In this passage, Schuyler's likenesses run a familiar circuit. Poetic value, first offered in a tempting absoluteness, is actually defined only in its relation to something else, the particularity of which should now stand out as telling: not a thing in the world itself but a thing to which wordly value adheres. More significantly, however, this particular thing is one whose value is in question. The poem's absolute value, in other words, is fixed to a time-bound but time-tested icon of capital's material contingency: a house on the market. Like a skyscraper "coming unstitched," a house for sale signifies a potential movement of value; unlike the active reconstruction of the built environment in Manhattan, however, the suburban house for sale looks more like potential energy: what happens if it doesn't sell? Capital's restless disruptive capacity appears here in a long interval of stasis, rather than the dramatic flux moving around the actual and metonymic Wall St. But the relation does not stop here. The house in question is itself framed by the overgrowth of natural metabolism that surrounds it. The poem, then, like the house for sale: potentially valuable, potentially undervalued, potentially valueless—dependent on a market which may never materialize, or which might have gone under. Unlike the house, however, the poem can also account for—can name—the lingering presence of a world of invaluable luxuriance (taxus, cotoneaster) that surrounds it. Momentarily pegged to property value, poetry can still partly resemble a world without it.

Through this relation between absolute and particular, two familiar human figures emerge—the white-collar worker and the poet himself. They are distinguished by their own respective relation to the house: unlike surplus product, the doctor and the poet cannot sit un-useful—they must continue to reproduce themselves, and by 1975 the general condition for doing so was selling

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<sup>33</sup> Schuyler, "Morning of the Poem," 262.

one's labor-power. The doctor responds by moving in order to compete in a better market. The poet decides to take his chances, to "stay" and "sort of starve." For a different poet, again, that decision might seem heroic, like ascetic refusal; for Schuyler it merely means navigating a comedy of human errors and delights:

yesterday I tripped on a scatter  
rug and slam fell full length,  
The wind knocked out of me: "Shall I call a  
doctor?" "Please don't talk"  
"Are you hurt? Can I help you?" "Shut the fuck  
up" I thought I'd smashed  
My kneecap—you know, like when you really  
wham your funny bone, only  
More so—but I got up and felt its nothing-  
broken-tenderness and  
Hobbled down this everlasting hill to distant  
Bell's and bought  
Edible necessities: small icy cans of concentrated  
juice, lemon, lime, orange,  
Vast puffy bags of bread, Smucker's raspberry jam,  
oatmeal, [. . . ]  
.....  
And hobbled home, studying the for-sale house  
hidden in scaly leaves  
The way the brownstone facing of your house is  
coming off in giant flakes: there's  
A word for that sickness of the stone but I  
can't remember it (you'll find  
It in that fascinating book *Brick and Brownstone*:  
illustrative photograph)<sup>34</sup>

Schuyler's physicality carries with it mortality and humor, but the poem mostly just luxuriates in the simple tasks of self-reproduction, lingering in the sonic pleasure of "edible necessities" ("Vast puffy bags of bread") even as it keeps its eye on the larger-scale fortune of the house for sale. The return to the poem's addressee, finally, also returns us to the moment of writing—"July 8 or 9, the

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<sup>34</sup> Schuyler, "The Morning of the Poem," 262-63.

eighth surely, certainly / 1976 that I know”—but also closes a certain loop that began with the absoluteness of truth in feeling.<sup>35</sup>

“The Morning of the Poem,” that is, never forgets that it’s a kind of pastoral epistle—a long wisdom poem speaking across a long distance. Written from an aging poet to a young artist back in Manhattan, the poem seeks to span not only the spatial difference between city and suburb, but also the generational distance between an established fixture of gay and artistic New York and a young entrant on the scene. Memory and description are the poem’s chief means of instruction—put very loosely—but its wisdom is constantly self-deflating:

Whoever knows what a painter is  
thinking? Is it obscure and muggy in Chelsea, or light and  
Shivery the way it is here? What shall I do with the rest of  
the morning? Shower, shave, write to Barbara,  
Go uptown and buy cool milk in waxy cartons? Call my nephew  
and go for a walk? Try to remember what I  
Forgot? What I can’t remember is the name of my New York  
doctor: “Murray.” But Murray what? I must have it  
Written down someplace, and if I haven’t “you” can tell me.  
When you read this poem you will have to decide  
Which of the “yous” are “you.” I think you will have no trouble,  
as you rise from your chair and take up your  
Brush again and scrub in some green, that particular green,  
whose name I can’t remember.<sup>36</sup>

It turns out more often than not that rather than the surety of “knowing what you know,” the poem can’t quite remember what it knows, though the poet is pretty sure where to look: “you’ll find / It in that fascinating book *Brick and Brownstone*.” Writing in the unevenness of the poet’s descriptive present, layered by memory and geography and the capricious movements of value, the poem returns to the speaker’s body and to a relation between sender and addressee. Both seem to

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<sup>35</sup> Schuyler, “The Morning of the Poem,” 259.

<sup>36</sup> Schuyler, “The Morning of the Poem,” 294-95.

bear a promise of a future in which, if the lost do not return, those still living can continue to eat  
and make art and visit:

Before dawn I woke and made my oatmeal, orange juice and  
Coffee and thought how this poem seems mostly about what I've  
lost: the one who mattered most, my best friend, Paul  
(Who mattered least), the Island, the California wildflower paper,  
the this, the that, Whippoorwill, buried friends,  
And the things I only write between the lines. What can one write  
between the lines? Not one damn thing. Look over  
Your shoulder, into the future: one thing I want to see is heavy  
snow falling in Chelsea, to walk in it, snow  
Blowing in my face, from where I live to where you live, to stomp  
the snow off in your vestibule, to punch your bell,  
To hear the buzzer buzz, to push the door and see the open inside  
door and you smiling there: "Hi-ee: how *are*  
You? What ill it be? The usual?" A tall cold glass of Vichy.  
Winter in New York, when the big wet flakes  
Stream horizontal.<sup>37</sup>

The poem comes to offer a kind of sermon not on absoluteness, then, but on the relation of the  
poem's absolute of feeling to the world around it—"an attitude toward life":

The low and seamless cloud is over us, the  
all there is to it  
Morning sky: again: day after day but today  
is breakthrough day, the sun  
Burns through then goes away then returns  
[...] the grass here and across  
The street (HOUSE FOR SALE) almost glares: a  
Lawn mower makes its heavy hum  
Advancing and retreating in a dance, a reel,  
sweet Jesus, it's my nephew  
Mike mowing his granny's lawn. [...] today  
is a year, a morning, this  
Morning was a year, I got up at six? six-thirty?  
on the grass there lay one  
Streak of morning light: the days and their different  
lights[.]<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Schuyler, "The Morning of the Poem," 296.

<sup>38</sup> Schuyler, "The Morning of the Poem," 272.

Here again, some 30 pages on from its initial appearance, is the “HOUSE FOR SALE,” in this passage anchoring the “dance” between lawn and sky, East Aurora and Chelsea, thunder storms and cloud break, literary history (Marvell’s “Damon the Mower”) and contemporary reality (nephew Mike). Which is also to say that like the parenthetical inflection of Kodak’s slow-motion collapse in “Dining Out,” the ultimate fate of the house for sale lies beyond the scope of the poem. Rather, moments of poetic devaluation—from truth to unsold home—provide occasions for grasping open-ended movements in capitalist value, movements which, at the outermost ring of poetic attention, might come crashing down; that house might just keep sinking into overgrowth. At the same time, the poem enacts and reenacts its own idiosyncratic work of survival—of self- and social reproduction.

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The crisis-driven recomposition of class and capital across the 1970s expressed itself in part through a spatial polarization between city and suburb that was graspable at once (if in different places) as relative stasis and flux: the changing city, the strange time-sink of the suburb. This particular combined unevenness, it turns out, offered Schuyler a deep background against which he could describe the pleasures and sorrows, the little diversions and regrets involved in trying to reproduce life in the seams of value’s determination.

In the decade after *The Morning of the Poem*’s publication, a younger generation—many schooled on Schuyler poems—will describe key components of this structure of feeling as queer. Schuyler’s handling of both mourning and temporality, in particular, has offered a deep reservoir for both queer poetics and queer critiques of social life.<sup>39</sup> As these currents have begun to

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<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York UP, 2009), 1-19.

reconverge around a critique of contemporary capital, we could do worse than to return once more to Schuyler, whose body of work describes an attitude toward life and value in a world whose likeness still shapes our own. Poetry in Schuyler's hands finds its value as unemployable time, so to speak, making its living out of the expansive immediacy of a single morning—which is actually a season, which is actually a year—attuning received generic habits of apprehension and address to the unevenness of everyday life mediated by the compulsions of the wage.

But love was never more  
than what Elijah  
listened to

That small  
that still  
a summoning forever  
immanent

—June Jordan

## CHAPTER 4

### “POOR RICH AMERICA”: THE COUNTRY AND THE CITY IN THE WORK OF JUNE JORDAN

The most recognizably “occasional” of the central poets in this study, June Jordan comprises a fitting bookend to the historical and poetic threads of the present argument—not just its endpoint, but that which helps make the constellation gathered so far mappable as such. Early experiences teaching poetry workshops with black and Puerto Rican teens in late-60s Harlem and Brooklyn shaped Jordan into an indefatigable champion of Black English, anti-oppression pedagogy, and youth justice; and she appears, over the course of her long career, as an active organizer and public intellectual within radical Civil Rights, open access, black feminist, lesbian and bisexual, anti-Apartheid, and Palestinian solidarity movements. Rightly renowned for the clarion political voice of her poetry and essays written from the mid-60s up until her death in 2002, which featured in venues such as *Black World*, *Ms.*, and *The Progressive*, Jordan achieved a public stature in her lifetime unmatched by the other poets in this dissertation. She was a poet-teacher whose simply stated but difficultly lived aspiration was merely “to go on record: To stand on the picket line, to march in the demonstration, to speak at the rally, to write and read the poems, to remember not to forget any of the minutes of the meetings of my one life among so many lives, at



risk.”<sup>1</sup> Unlike Whitman, Toomer, and Schuyler, Jordan’s reputation is as an unequivocally political poet, whose poems, with titles like “Current Events,” “Poem for Angela,” “I Must Become a Menace to My Enemies,” “Poem for my Rights,” “Calling all Silent Minorities,” and more, would, along with the poet herself, “go on record.”

Seen as an almost paradigmatic movement poet, Jordan principally gets read for the ways her poetry poses questions of language, democracy, and witness through the crucible of difference.<sup>2</sup> As her friend Adrienne Rich suggests in the preface to her collected poems, however, Jordan’s concern with identity is the point of departure, rather than the terminus, of her thinking: “She believed, and nourished the belief,” Rich writes, “that genuine, up-from-the-bottom revolution must include art, laughter, sensual pleasure, and the widest possible human referentiality. She wrote from her experience in a woman’s body and a dark skin, though never solely ‘as’ or ‘for.’”<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I seek to specify the terms of Jordan’s “up-from-the-bottom revolution[ary]” feeling by resituating the formative years of her career (1965-1980) in relation to the urban crisis and the contradictory forces of combined and uneven development that it indexed.

Examining her unpublished and un-examined book-length manuscripts on land reform from across the 1970s—especially work on her forgotten second novel, *Okay Now*—I show how “go[ing] on record” in this pivotal period meant getting her bearings—political, personal, poetic—in what she called “Poor Rich America,” or the social reality in which American capital’s postwar productivity miracle came to require crumbling urban cores, on the one hand, and extreme rural

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<sup>1</sup> June Jordan, *Civil Wars*, xvii. Hereafter abbreviated *CW* and cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, the essays collected in *Still Seeking an Attitude: Critical Reflections on the Work of June Jordan*, ed. Valerie Kinloch and Margaret Grebowicz (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Jordan, *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan*, ed. Jan Heller Levi and Sara Miles (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2005), xxii. Hereafter abbreviated *DD* and cited parenthetically by page number.

poverty on the other.<sup>4</sup> At the same time as her writing and advocacy for Black English was gaining national attention, Jordan was working hard to articulate a post-Civil Rights politics of survival and liberation mediated by access to the material means of subsistence—housing, a wage, the land itself. In this chapter, I suggest that Jordan’s forgotten rural turn comprises a crucial terminus to her early career focus on urban studies and environmental design and ties together a nexus of thinking about urban space, deindustrialization, and the American countryside that can help clarify certain distinctive features of her activist poetry. Jordan, I argue, writes a topical poetry whose *topos* is not so much difference or identity as the ongoing processes of material separation from the possibilities for human thriving. Across the 1960s, those processes entered a new phase of their history (which also happens to be our own), marked by an epochal crisis in the wage that appeared—if not first then most clearly—as a crisis of the American city. In her published poetry, I’ll show, Jordan comes to think the shifting relationship between “the country and the city” in this period through a somewhat unexpected generic lens: the Classical Roman love elegy.<sup>5</sup>

Best known as a teacher, poet, and essayist, I will describe how Jordan cut her teeth as an urban planner in an era of urban crisis. Indeed, Jordan herself locates the start of her career in the heady days of spatial transformation and urban unrest precipitated by the “long hot summer” of 1964-65, which she approaches with the tools of modernist architecture and urban planning. In her first major job as a professional writer, Jordan was commissioned by *Esquire* magazine to write an account of the 1964 riots in Harlem and Brooklyn. Instead, Jordan chose to introduce herself to R. Buckminster Fuller and begin a collaborative project on “an environmental redesign of

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<sup>4</sup> Jordan, “More than Enough” (unpublished manuscript, 1972), June Jordan Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, box 49, folder 7, page 64. All material quoted from the June Jordan Papers at Radcliffe’s Schlesinger library is used by permission. Copyright 2020, June M. Jordan Literary Estate Trust. [www.junejordan.com](http://www.junejordan.com)

<sup>5</sup> My title borrows from Raymond Williams’s famous study of similar questions in the British pastoral tradition (*The Country and the City* [London: Vintage, 2016]).

Harlem.” Over the next few years, meanwhile, Jordan worked as a researcher at Mobilization for the Youth, a leading Great Society program where she produced research and policy papers aimed to “redesign low-income housing on the Lower East Side” (*DD*, 468).

If Jordan is the most “occasional” of the poets in this study, then, she is also the poet who thinks most explicitly about the social forces of combined and uneven development that it has been tracking since the 1860s, although this aspect of her work is largely unfamiliar to her readers. Indeed, initially thinking in terms of urban space and planning, by 1970 Jordan comes to understand “the urban crisis” itself as merely a part of a crisis in the wage relation more broadly. This crisis, precipitated by the very course of capitalist development, had been exacting itself unevenly upon racialized populations at both the center and the frontiers of a struggling American empire years in advance of the headline economic shocks of 1973. In an unpublished manuscript from the early 70s, Jordan puts things this way:

In the accelerating, unavoidable, and massive dislocation of the American labor force, a disintegration that has already begun, newly threatened and indigent American peoples will confront the government with a truly unprecedented problem. What is happening is this: people are losing and will lose their jobs and also their employable status—*not* because the economy is failing, as was the case during the Depression, but because the economy, the whole producer complex, is succeeding.<sup>6</sup>

Jordan here taps into a contemporaneous anxiety around “automation” made manifest in a cresting wave of agrarian industrialization and out-migration to urban economies already beginning to show

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<sup>6</sup> Jordan, “More than Enough” (unpublished manuscript, 1972), June Jordan Papers, box 49, folder 7, page 116, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University. All material quoted from the June Jordan Papers at Radcliffe’s Schlesinger library is used by permission. Copyright 2020, June M. Jordan Literary Estate Trust. [www.junejordan.com](http://www.junejordan.com)

the limits of their capacities to absorb labor. Oriented by life in Brooklyn, Harlem, and “mississippi-america,” as well as by global black and women’s liberation movements, Jordan senses the ways in which capital’s expanding productive capacities lead not so much to the universal extension of the factory as to the increasing immiseration of life for those populations given only precarious access to a wage in the first place (*CW*, 77).

Indeed, the passage above comes from writing pursued alongside Jordan’s almost wholly forgotten second novel, entitled, at different points from the early 70s to early 1990s, *Okay Now* and *On Time*. Manifest in two completed manuscripts as well as in countless pages of unpublished poetry, research, and polemic spanning more than two decades, *Okay Now* imagines an autonomous, black-led movement to expropriate the American countryside as the basis for building integrated rural communes. Jordan’s commitment to radical “land reform” has not yet entered into scholarly accounts of her career, however, even as her early architectural writings have become more widely read. Such an absence is not surprising given Jordan’s prolific record in print. (Even as many of her works have fallen out of circulation, Jordan remains one of the most published African American writers of the last fifty years.) But situating Jordan’s intellectual and political commitments to “land reform” in their place of prominence across her writing from the 70s and 80s promises to alter our understanding of the formative concerns and contexts of her maturing career.

I will go on to argue that Jordan answers the social force of this crisis most concretely in her love poetry, in which she strives to imagine how momentary encounters can express far-flung relations to value while opening up time- and place-bound possibilities for solidarity and radical address—what she calls at one point “communit[ies] of moment” (*CW*, 47). In doing so, she makes palpable the poetic “community of moment” imagined by this dissertation. Amidst the ramping movements of industrialization and migration in the 1920s, recall, Toomer turns toward

traditions of georgic poetry and to a prosimetric shape that can hold the felt foreclosures on black collective life caught between sharecropping and the urban-industrial wage. Jordan, I will argue, meets the end of this 50-year historical arc not with the poetics of work and wisdom, but with the resources of love poetry—especially those of the love elegy—drawn from some unlikely sources. She turns, of course, to one of Toomer and Jordan’s shared touchstones—Whitman—but also, farther afield, to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Agostinho Neto, the Angolan revolutionary and poet.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, if the occasion of the urban crisis allows Schuyler to mediate values in order to touch the hem of capital, I will argue here that a similar set of social forces empower Jordan to downshift both the apocalyptic and the utopian into the everyday. This in turn underwrites a love poetry whose coordination of a transitory, dispersed intimacy imagines ways of moving across and between the near and far, combined and uneven in order to momentarily illuminate the motions of totality. In the poems that result, I conclude, Jordan ends up flipping the conventional problematic of political poetry. That is, while her poems are often explicitly occasioned, they also strive to *become* occasions in turn—for critical understanding, for the regeneration of political energy, for declarations of a solidarity whose lower limit is bodily presence and whose upper limit is revolutionary longing.

# 1. POET AS PLANNER, PLANNER AS REVOLUTIONARY

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<sup>7</sup> By situating the innovativeness of Jordan’s poetics within a continuous history that includes not only contemporaneous movements but also the Renaissance poetry of Toomer and longer standing generic trajectories, I follow the lead of Nathaniel Mackey, Evie Shockley, and others who have sought to unhinge the aesthetic and political values of black poetry from any singular program for how it should look, feel, or move. See Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2011). Jordan herself deserves mention in this context. See, “Notes Toward a Black Balancing of Love and Hatred (1974),” in *Civil Wars*, where Jordan explicitly rejects zero-sum arguments about the politics of representing blackness, which she sees as enforcing a false choice between an art of protest and an art of affirmation (*CW*, 84-89).

Before turning to her love poetry, we must first track the largely uncharted evolution of Jordan's thinking about race, politics, and development across the first decade of her career, roughly 1965-75. Jordan's political sensibility first began to take shape in her architectural and urban studies writing from the mid-60s, which chart a self-guided critical geography of New York's urban crisis.<sup>8</sup> Studying the history of New York's built environments—particularly its working class housing—in the wake of the 1964 Harlem riots, Jordan comes to view the built environment and the use of space as the pervasive, thorough-going expressions of social reality: “[T]he architecture of experience,” she avers to Fuller, “deeply determines an incalculable number and variety of habits—i.e., the nature of quotidian existence” (*CW*, 26). By the early 1970s, her interest in the urban built environment will morph into a more wholistic attempt to think historically *and* spatially about the city and the countryside together. But in the mid-60s, architecture and urban planning offer Jordan a radical grammar for answering the personal-political impasses she feels around reform, revolution, and the Civil Rights movement.

Indeed, Jordan's retrospective framing of her career in her 1980 essay collection, *Civil Wars* begins not with poetry, but with the conjunction of architecture and the Harlem riots. In the early summer of 1964, Jordan recalls, she had just finished work imbedded on the set of Frederick Wiseman's Blaxploitation prototype, *The Cool World*, and was looking for her next freelance job. When *The Herald Tribune* approached her “to determine whether or not there would be a ‘long hot summer’ in Harlem,” she took on the question seriously. Much to the chagrin of the paper's white editors, however, Jordan concluded that, indeed, “there would have to be/that there *should* be a long hot summer because, as I titled my essay, ‘nothing is new to the man uptown’” (*CW*, 16-

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<sup>8</sup> Responding to similar circumstances as Jordan, the geographer David Harvey defines “critical geography” as the investigation into how “space and the political organization of space express social relationships but also react back upon them.” David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973), 306.

17). The editors disagreed and put the article on hold. As usual, history outpaced the disagreement: “That weekend,” Jordan recalls, “was the weekend of the Harlem Riots of 1964” (*CW*, 17). In the weeks and months that followed, similar riots would break out in Detroit, Rochester, Newark, and Watts, and Jordan, like many of her contemporaries, would find her writing suddenly of interest among national publishers and media outlets newly interested in the urban character of race relations in America.<sup>9</sup>

The Harlem riots proved to be a turning point in more ways than one. The details are now (as then) rote: a young black teenager, 15-year-old Jerome Powell, was murdered by an off-duty NYPD officer, sparking a massive police mobilization and nearly a week of rioting across Harlem and the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, Jordan’s childhood and adolescent homes, respectively. Jordan would recall the situation in Harlem on the night of Powell’s funeral service in terms resembling a war zone:

Dorothy Moscou and I threaded our way through the sidewalk mushrooms of police. We were heading for the funeral of the boy. The presence of so many policemen began to make me nervous, frightened, and angry. We went to the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel: 132<sup>nd</sup> St. and 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Past this corner, no one was allowed. Buses began to arrive, taxis, civilian automobiles, fire engines with sadistic screeching—all vehicles jammed with policemen. The territory was clearly invaded. I could not believe it when still another bus would brake to a stop at that intersection and disgorge still another hundred combatants. Overhead, helicopters dawdled and dived and contributed to the unreal scene of a full-scale war with no one but

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<sup>9</sup> See Daniel Matlin, *On the Corner: African American Intellectuals and the Urban Crisis* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2013).

enemies in view. . . . Bottles began to pelt the street aiming at police cars, policemen. Every time there was a hit, the probably thousand of us on both sides of that street would yell and applaud. Cops were firing endlessly now. (*CW*, 18)

Nationally, the recent signing of the Civil Rights Bill and the nomination of Barry Goldwater as the Republican presidential nominee provided a stark backdrop to the uprising. On the heels of the landmark civil rights legislation, the riots thrust back into the spotlight questions of strategy, tactics, and respectability, and aggravated existing fractures among white liberals, black organizers on the ground in Northern cities, and the state-recognized leaders of the Civil Rights movement.<sup>10</sup> The Goldwater campaign, meanwhile, colored everything with the foreshadow of reaction. “Every seventh word, by the way, in the Harlem crowds, was GOLDWATER,” Jordan noted. Pinned between reform and reaction, enemies all around, she agreed with the crowd: “My sentiments exactly” (*CW*, 22).

For many, including Jordan, the riots also underscored the limitations of the acceptable framework of civil rights when applied to the conditions of *de facto* segregation in northern cities. These conditions themselves were relatively unfamiliar to the national consciousness, for which black life and racial inequality still belonged largely to the formally segregated South, even after two waves of Great Migration.<sup>11</sup> The riots, however, definitively recast America’s color line in terms of its increasingly acute “urban crisis.” The strategic pressure points of the vote and legal integration that drove the movement in the South came to be felt by liberals and radicals alike to be insufficient to the facts of the Northern city. This sense, and the quickly fracturing coalition around civil rights, would lead Martin Luther King, Jr. to suggest that it wasn’t racial tensions so much as

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<sup>10</sup> See Michael W. Flamm, *In the Heat of the Summer: The New York Riots of 1964 and the War on Crime* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2017), 205-30.

<sup>11</sup> See Flamm, 8-14.



economic realities driving these sequences of urban unrest: “What we witnessed in the Watts area was the beginning of a stirring of a deprived people in a society who had been by-passed by the progress of the previous decade. I would minimize the racial significance and point to the fact that these were the rumblings of discontent from the ‘have-nots’ within the midst of an affluent society.”<sup>12</sup> In a politically complicated side-step here, intended not least to shore-up recent rights-based gains by distinguishing the Civil Rights movement from racialized poverty in the North, King implies that outside of the South, the problem of racial prejudice fades behind the more immediately apparent screen of class. In the years after these remarks, up until his assassination, King will pursue means of reconnecting these fraying ends. Already implicit in King’s either/or construction, however, is a slightly different understanding: that the “racial significance” of the uprisings lay precisely in the entwined production of “have-nots” and affluence as two sides of the same postwar developmental coin.<sup>13</sup>

If the Harlem riots signaled a turning point for the course of struggles over the long, last gasp of accessible social surpluses, for Jordan, out of work and a newly single parent, they also marked the inaugural turn in her career as a poet, essayist, and public intellectual. Jordan’s particular point of access into the charged public discourse of the “urban crisis” was her self-directed study in modern architecture, design, and urban planning: with “America . . . plunging into a holocaust confrontation,” Jordan recalls “[a]rchitecture became an obsession” (*CW*, xxiv). It’s not a surprise, then, that when approached by *Esquire* magazine to write a feature on the Harlem riots, Jordan opted instead to introduce herself to Fuller—whom she had discovered in her

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Carson Clayborne (New York: Hachette, 1998), 291-92.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

self-guided architectural study—and propose a collaborative “architectural redesign of Harlem” (*CW*, 23).

In this *Esquire* commission, Jordan displaces the expected genre of spectacular reportage with a different, if still familiar, post-riot genre: the urban plan. “Following the Harlem riots of 1964,” Jordan writes, “a profusion of remedies for what was at last accepted as a critical situation appeared everywhere; nowhere, however, was environmental redesign given prime emphasis. Yet it is architecture, conceived of in its fullest meaning as the creation of environment, which may actually determine the pace, pattern and quality of living experience.”<sup>14</sup> The proposal that follows is nothing short of radical. It imagines the demolition and redevelopment of almost the entire built environment of upper Manhattan, from 110<sup>th</sup> street to the George Washington Bridge, and the East to the Harlem Rivers. In advance of the bulldozers, fifteen conical skyscrapers—“resembl[ing] abstract, stylized Christmas trees”—would be built above the existing buildings of Harlem, rising from the 7<sup>th</sup> story up.<sup>15</sup> This strategy, one of Fuller’s key interventions, was meant to avoid any need for resident displacement: “[O]nce the new structures stood completed and in place, the old would be razed, entirely, and Harlem families would literally move up into their new homes.”<sup>16</sup> The towers would be self-sufficient complexes able to house a quarter of a million people, with entire floors devoted to shopping, cultural activities, childcare, and so on. They would also be linked by elevated highways, with internal parking ramps spiraling around each tower’s central column providing designated parking for every apartment.<sup>17</sup> In Jordan’s vision for the plan, though not included in the published *Esquire* piece, the gridded street level would also be reimagined and rebuilt with “as many curvilinear features of street patterning as possible,” with “the present

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<sup>14</sup> June Meyer (Jordan), “Instant Slum Clearance,” *Esquire* April 1965, 111.

<sup>15</sup> Meyer (Jordan), 111.

<sup>16</sup> Jordan, *Civil Wars*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> See Meyer (Jordan), 111; and Daniel Matlin “‘A New Reality of Harlem’: Imagining the African American Urban Future During the 1960s,” *Journal of American Studies* 52.4 (2018): 1010.

patterns of confrontation by parallel lines” replaced by “an arterial system of green spaces leading to water; an arterial system psychologically operative from any position in Harlem” (*CW*, 27).

“The design,” Jordan extols, “will obliterate a valley of shadows.”<sup>18</sup> For Jordan, Fuller’s utopian twist on modernist traditions of architecture and design offered “a way, a scale, of looking at things that escaped the sundering paralysis of conflict,” answering the painfully felt limits of the civil rights and labor movements to achieve anything but partial accommodations with an Olympian perspective free to imagine remaking New York’s cityscape unbound by its haphazard and complex history (*CW*, “Foreward”).

“Skyrise for Harlem” has begun to draw more scholarly attention of late, with a debate taking shape around the question of the proposal’s spatial politics. Vermonja R. Alston and Cheryl J. Fish have connected “Skyrise” to nascent discourses of “environmental justice” and have given us in turn compelling portraits of Jordan as an important figure for mapping a black ecopoetics.<sup>19</sup> Daniel Matlin, on the other hand, has convincingly shown “Skyrise’s” unexpected resonance with the period’s discourse of urban blight. Jordan and Fuller’s plan, Matlin rightly emphasizes, “amounts . . . to an erasure of Harlem—the destruction or evacuation of the entire built environment within which black Harlem’s history had unfolded[.]”<sup>20</sup> In the context of community struggles over the terms of neighborhood development in the postwar city, Jordan and Fuller’s vision is, in fact, much closer to the spirit of Robert Moses than Jane Jacobs or Jordan’s old teacher at Barnard College, Herbert J. Gans. Even as it projects life beyond the grid, “Skyrise’s” imaginary of mega high-rises, uninterrupted elevated highways, and concentrated mixed-use space

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<sup>18</sup> Meyer (Jordan), 111.

<sup>19</sup> See Vermonja R. Alston, “‘Moving Towards Home’: The Politics and Poetics of Environmental Justice in the Work of June Jordan,” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 7.1 (2005): 36-48; Cheryl J. Fish, “Place, Emotion, and Environmental Justice in Harlem: June Jordan and Buckminster Fuller’s 1965 ‘Architextual’ Collaboration,” *Discourse* 29.2/3 (2007): 330-45.

<sup>20</sup> Matlin, “‘A New Reality of Harlem,’” 1003.

exemplifies key elements of Moses's super-block, modernist development strategies.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, although it proposes to solve the problem of displacement, its dismissal of Harlem's existing, lived and historical particularity duplicates the logics of urban renewal that see black, brown, and working poor neighborhoods in general as non-sites open to apocalyptic change. The editors at *Esquire* evidently saw this overlap when they changed the essay's title to "Instant Slum Clearance," a change which, while reductive, is also not wrong.

Indeed, at its simplest, "Skyrise" imagines that urban renewal could be disarticulated from Negro removal, as James Baldwin put it. Such an imaginary has not fared well in the proving ground of recent history, to say the least. But for a figure known and rightly admired for the uncompromising ways her writing voices the inherent dignity and moral and epistemological authority of oppressed subjects on their own terms, this series of echoes is surprising, if not also troubling. How could Jordan, so highly regarded for the clarity and complexity of her thinking about racial justice, take such a dim view of Harlem as an actual living and historical *place*?

Matlin's essay situates this question in the context of other architectural responses to the 1964 riots; I suggest we consider it also as an immanent response to the shifting patterns of combined and uneven development that the riots focalized. To King's point above, nearly 20 percent of low-skilled black men living in cities in the 1960s were jobless and out of school, a figure that would double over the course of the following decades.<sup>22</sup> The Johnson administration's minimal efforts to improve life in inner cities (and pacify increasingly radical demands for racial justice and social transformation) would fail to stem the tides of capital flight, immiseration, and

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<sup>21</sup> On Robert Moses and urban renewal, see Hilary Ballon, "Robert Moses and Urban Renewal: The Title I Program," in *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York*, ed. Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson (New York: Norton, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> John Clegg and Adaner Usmani, "The Economics of Mass Incarceration," *Catalyst* 3.3 (2019), figure 5.

uprisings constitutive of the long downturn's opening decade.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, while the seeds of crisis were present in declining industrial profits and capital flight as early as the mid-60s (in some places like Detroit even in the 50s), the underlying limits of the "affluent society" were always apparent in the lives of racialized, and especially black working communities all over the country. Processes of combined development—the postwar collapse of the sharecropping economy in the South and the rise of automation in Northern factories—produced the conditions for a definitive transition toward industry in the U.S., albeit one without the familiar absorption of those workers expelled from the fields. Unlike in the 1920s, or in the major industrial revolutions of the nineteenth century, excess labor was entering the cities at the same time as capital was beginning to flee them, producing conditions for a sharpened internal unevenness at the heart of the city, whereby already racialized populations at the edges of the formal wage embodied the growing superfluity of living labor to capital in general.<sup>24</sup> In this view, the swirling currents that came together in the hot nights in Harlem and Brooklyn were themselves tell-tales in a larger historical sea-change. With hindsight, the bottles, debris, and bullets exchanged between black New Yorkers and the police represent the early salvos in struggles—already manifest in a wave of anti-colonial uprisings abroad—over capital's global restructuring around falling industrial profitability. Jordan's invocation of the soon-to-be

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<sup>23</sup> See William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>24</sup> Peter Gottlieb succinctly captures the difference between the two great waves of black migration out of the South: "Framed by persisting racial oppression and lagging southern economic development, the 1945-70 period of black migration was hardly a buoyant redistribution of population around new frontiers of economic opportunity. . . . Black out-migration from the region became a recourse, rather than a strategy, for individual and group betterment—almost a movement of resignation and despair. . . . Except for brief periods during the 1940s and 1950s, [Southern black migrants] were as much refugees as migrants" (77). Refugees from the American South were not alone; rather, the dynamics of rising agricultural productivity and shrinking urban opportunity characterizes the *global* industrial transition that accelerated from the 1950s on. See Mike Davis, *Planet of Shums* (London: Verso, 2006); Aaron Benanav, "A Global History of Unemployment: Surplus Populations in the World Economy, 1949-2010" (Los Angeles: U of California, PhD Dissertation, 2015); and Phil A. Neel, *Hinterland: America's New Landscape of Class and Conflict* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018).

general figure of the police as an occupying army in her account of the riots hints at the palpability of this confluence on the ground.

In relation to these social forces, architecture and design seem to have offered Jordan a framework with which to think the systemic—rather than singular—occasion of the riots. More forcefully still, they afforded Jordan a way of articulating the quotidian immediacy of historical determination. Indeed, in the immediate wake of the riots, modernist design and urban planning came to strike Jordan as almost limitless in their potential to reorder the most intimate social relations in more just and harmonious forms. Considering the simplicity of a Bauhaus spoon, for instance, Jordan imagines, painfully, how it might have saved her mother's life and her own childhood, "changing, for instance, the kitchen where I grew up, baffled by the archeological layers of aimless, wrong-year calendars . . . and endlessly, dysfunctional clutter/material of no morale, of clear, degenerating morass and mire, of slum, of resignation" (*CW*, xxv). Similarly, the thought of her son Christopher and the realities of reproductive labor are never far from Jordan's reflections on the city, as evidenced by the consistent framing of her self-guided study in architecture as time stolen from her unwaged labor as a wife and mother: "This was my one evening out, every week: Michael would come home by six o'clock, if humanly possible, and I would then leave him and Christopher to eat the dinner I had already prepared, and rush to the corner bus stop. At the Donnell I lost myself among rooms and doorways and Japanese gardens and Bauhaus chairs and spoons" (*CW*, xxiv-v). Jordan's young adult novel, *His Own Where* (1971), meanwhile, which restages much of her thinking about urban space in lyrical prose written in Black English, revolves around different axes of reproductive labor and their distinct spatializations in the hospital, the

tenement, the school, and, finally, the fugitive home.<sup>25</sup> In these works, geographies of care and housing emerge as the most immediate evidence of the violent constraints that capitalist social relations impose on the possibilities for individual and collective life.

The reconstruction of those geographies in turn holds out the promise of creating environments wholly oriented around human flourishing. “I hope that we may implicitly instruct the reader,” Jordan writes to Fuller of their collaboration, “in the comprehensive impact of every Where, of any *place*”:

This requires development of an idea or theory of place in terms of human being; of space designed as the volumetric expression of successful existence between earth and sky; of space cherishing as it amplifies the experience of being alive, the capability of endless beginnings, and the entrusted liberty of motion; of . . . a particular space that is open-receptive and communicant yet sheltering particular life (*CW*, 28).

It’s in passages like this that readers like Alston and Fish recognize the lineaments of Jordan’s ecological thinking, notably humanist in cast here. The rather explicit instruction offered by “Skyrise” is that these nourishing, seamless human-world relations need to be “deliberately designed”: “You can build to defend the endurance of man, to protect his existence, to illuminate it. But you cannot build for these purposes merely in spasmodic response to past and present crises, for then crisis, like the poor, will be with us always. If man is to have not only a future but a destiny, it must be consciously and deliberately designed.”<sup>26</sup> “Skyrise,” in other words, entertains the possibility (or the fantasy, perhaps) that intentional, progressive spatial redevelopment might

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<sup>25</sup> The novel ends with the principal characters taking refuge from the city and social services in a large mausoleum within a Brooklyn cemetery, which becomes a temporary canvas for articulating the main character’s (and Jordan’s) emancipatory architectural values.

<sup>26</sup> Jordan (Meyer), 111.

undo histories of human separation from nature lived in gendered and racialized divisions of labor: “[A]ny view of Harlem will likely indicate the presence of human life—people whose surroundings suggest that survival is a mysterious and even pointless phenomenon. On the streets of Harlem, sources of sustenance are difficult to discover. . . . Nor is labor available—labor that directly affects, in manifold ways, the manners of existence. Keeping warm is a matter of locating the absentee landlord rather than an independent expedition to gather wood for a fire” (*CW*, 26). By replacing the haphazard organization of space in Harlem—or in her mother’s kitchen—with habitats designed around human flourishing, “Skyrise” would reverse these conditions, “rescu[ing] a quarter million lives by completely transforming their environment.”<sup>27</sup>

Remarkably, Jordan and Fuller imagined that such a rescue operation could be accomplished in just three years, though it would entail, and require, “‘tooling up’ a mass manufacturing facility” (*CW*, 24): “The enormous sum of units entailed by this design assumes the pioneer, belated establishment of housing on a thoroughly industrial basis.”<sup>28</sup> “Skyrise,” in other words, imagines mobilizing industrial production at almost miraculous rates toward emancipatory ends, envisioning a means of abolishing the material strata of race through the literal top-down application of rightly designed habitats: Fuller’s massive “Christmas tree[]”-like high-rises would be delivered primarily “by helicopter.” Once completed, “Harlem families would literally move up into their new homes” (*CW*, 24) and Harlem itself would make a great leap from unplanned slum to a “national, showcase” for “a comprehensively conceived new community for human beings.”<sup>29</sup> Jordan and Fuller effectively literalize period logics of economic and social planning that saw the possibility of mobilizing combined development against capital’s own production of spatial

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<sup>27</sup> June Meyer (Jordan), “Instant Slum Clearance,” *Esquire* April 1965, 109.

<sup>28</sup> Meyer (Jordan), 111.

<sup>29</sup> Meyer (Jordan), “Instant Slum Clearance,” 111.



unevenness. The conscious pursuit of industrial economies of scale, they argue, will mean “the literal elevation of Harlem.”<sup>30</sup>

Writing a few short years before “Skyrise,” from another theater in the convulsing world system that would express itself in Harlem, 1964, Frantz Fanon describes the very possibilities and pitfalls of national combined development in terms reminiscent of Jordan and Fuller’s vision of Olympian elevation: “If the building of a bridge does not enrich the awareness of those who work on it, then the bridge ought not to be built and the citizens can go on swimming across the river or going by boat. The bridge should not be ‘parachuted down’ from above; it should not be imposed by a *deus ex machina* upon the social scene; on the contrary it should come from the muscles and the brains of the citizens.”<sup>31</sup> Jordan might have agreed; she too sees the importance of improving the built environment in its contributions to human development. Indeed, even as she was working with Fuller to plan precisely a *deus ex machina* solution to Harlem’s human and physical underdevelopment—to imagine an apocalyptic transformation literally delivered from on high—she was equally adamant that “Harlem residents [participate] in the birth of their new reality” (*CW*, 26). These two impulses—planning and self-determination—are evidently at odds in the “Skyrise” writing, however, since the actual plan leaves very little room for those living in Harlem to work out their spatial reality.

Although it would be easy enough to dismiss Jordan and Fuller’s vision as 60s futurist naivety (as the editors of *Esquire* effectively did), it’s also easy, from here, to forget the particular material confluences of the moment, in which anti-colonial and anti-racist movements across the globe were coalescing around the motley figure of the lumpen at the same time as capital’s

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<sup>30</sup> Meyer (Jordan), 111.

<sup>31</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 200-1. Thanks to Aditya Bahl for alerting me to this particular passage.

flickering profitability could still throw cover for imagining what might be done with the gears of production if/when seized. Jordan's "Skyrise" writing sits at the crux of that unsettled conjuncture, turning to architecture, planning, and design for ways to think both the scope of human underdevelopment under capital and the partiality of the civil rights movement's successes. Its appeals to architecture as omnipotent savior are equally partial. But "Skyrise" is valuable precisely for this reason. Its internal tensions indicate the contours of a problem that Jordan's work address itself to: the contemporary movements of combined and uneven development as they reproduce modes of life shut off from possibilities for full human development.

## 2. FROM URBAN RENEWAL TO RURAL DE-DEVELOPMENT

"Skyrise" has largely been treated as an isolated incident in Jordan's career, or even as an anomalous precursor to her career proper. The record of Jordan's archive, however, suggests that as she built on her "Skyrise" work across the 60s—first as a researcher at Mobilization for the Youth and then as a Rome Prize recipient in architecture and environmental design—her underlying concern with human and economic development, survival, and the built environment persisted and, more, evolved. Indeed, in her post-"Skyrise" writing on the "urban crisis," Jordan begins to connect the spatial and developmental contradictions that occupied her attention to the emerging crisis in the wage-relation more broadly, which was beginning to express itself as capital's (and cities') failure to absorb populations thrown out of rural production by the course of accumulation itself. At the level of revolutionary vision, still occupied with the combined and uneven topographies of human development pressing on her everyday life and work, Jordan will replace urban renewal with rural "land reform," moving from an imaginary of enlightened combined development to one of emancipatory *de*-development, so to speak.

In the poem that emerges most directly from her 60s research, “47,000 Windows,” for instance, the apocalypticism of “Skyrise” is evident, but also takes on a slightly different cast. In the poem’s headnote, Jordan argues that the built environment of the Lower East Side materializes “a history of American contradiction, devotion to profit, and the failure of environmental design for human life.” The poem that follows is “about” New York City’s 1869 Tenement Act, which “passed some light and air into [the] deliberated slum” of the Lower East Side by requiring that each habitable room have a window (*DD*, 59). Jordan uses the law, however, to scrutinize the longstanding historical character of the contemporary urban crisis. Commemorating its occasion a century too late, the poem’s ongoing circumstance is as evergreen as “American contradiction, devotion to profit.”

Broken into 10 short, numbered stanzas, Jordan’s poem spatializes this historical narrative in blocks that resemble both the enclosure of the tenement buildings and the minimal punctures of the “windows” that broke light and air into the buildings. Here, however, the built environment merely materializes a larger social historical rhythm:

4.     Unskilled millions crammed old mansions  
       broke apart large rooms and took a corner  
       held a place a spot a bed a chair a box  
       a looking glass  
       and kept that space (except for death)  
       a safety now for fugitives from infamy and famine  
       working hard to live.
5.     In place of land that street the outhouse  
       tenement testimonies  
       to a horrifying speculation that would quarter  
       and condemn  
       debase and shadow and efface  
       the privacies of human being.

(*DD*, 61)

Architecture may determine “quotidian existence,” but “47,000 Windows” suggests that it’s really just an expression of forces that exceed it. Indeed, Jordan presents the story of both the Lower East Side tenements and the reform movements that answer them as side-plots in a longer and larger history of separation, of “small many people forced / from land from farms from food from family forced / like seasons dictatorial,” “pushed into the seaport cornucopia of New York” (*DD*, 60). The historical, legal, and poetic matter of the tenement building thereby allows Jordan to grasp the ongoing historical linkages between the concentration of people, capital, and poverty, even as the faces and bodies that occupy those positions change: “Real estate arose as profit spread / to mutilate the multitudes and kill them / living just to live. What can a man survive? / They say: the poor persist” (*DD*, 61). Amidst that persistence, “47,000 Windows” ends on a note of satirical venom (“*It must be hard to make a window*”) that emphasizes the absurdity of legislating minimally humane conditions within a vast social “machinery for triumph / by a few” (*DD*, 60). Written just a year or two after “Skyrise,” “47,000 Windows” evinces both a deepening in Jordan’s historical-material thinking and a modulation in its apocalypticism—moving from prescription to satire, say.

If this latter change seems slight, it also owes to an important shift in the way Jordan tries to think totality, now accessed less through the architectural features of the urban crisis than the dynamics of the labor pool as they shape the built environment. This heralds a sharper turn in Jordan’s thinking from 1970 on. Writing a letter of interest to the convener of a Black Environmental Studies team at the School of Art and Architecture at Yale in October of 1972, for instance, Jordan introduces her new agenda this way: “I am currently hard at work to complete my second novel, *Okay Now*, which, again, centers on a proposal for environmental re-design, land reform in mississippi-america that would provide rescue for Black people now ‘mechanized off’

the land and/or stranded in dead-end, ‘center-city’ situations of despair.”<sup>32</sup> Here we can see a continuation of the thread that comes to the fore in “47,000 Windows”; the environmental context for racialized exploitation and domination is no longer the built environment but a broader relation between the city and the countryside that hinges on the contemporary state of technical development, of the relation of people to increasingly mechanized production processes.

As architecture and planning lose their analytic primacy, the development question finds its new footing in a critique of value within what Jordan sees as the linked material and moral economies of American capitalism. Jordan frames life in America in terms of the totalizing, destructive social logic of accumulation, or what she refers to as “success”: “Success of the American economy is a direction, an unrelenting aim; it is not a position you can occupy, or an achievement that you can dust, polish and preserve; success is the substance of the speed of your pursuit.” Oriented toward the “abstractions” of a “life-depriving” totality—“dollar bills,” “Gross National Product,” “the world economy”—Jordan sees the contemporary shape of this compulsion toward “success” as dependent on the ratcheting pursuit of “efficiency,” or on “automation”:

*More* is the first priority: productivity; increasing the substance of the pursuit, itself.

The first criterion for the successful pursuit of *more* is that of efficiency; maximal efficiency of means: This value demands the elimination of variables, of different and therefore possibly conflicting/uncontrollable factors, *such as people*.

Automation is only one way to eliminate (people) variables, for the sake of maximal efficiency. . . . *In America, maximal success means maximal efficiency means maximal elimination of variables means maximal, increasing elimination of the people from the process of production.*<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Jordan to T. H. Rucker, 31 October 1972, June Jordan Papers, box 49, folder 5.

<sup>33</sup> Jordan, “More than Enough,” 49.7, 117; all italics original.

Jordan here echoes contemporaneous anxieties around “technological unemployment,” which were evident among both New Left intellectuals and bourgeois economists alike, and which grasped with differing degrees of clarity the shifting grounds of accumulation as the “golden age of capitalism” wound down. Writing amidst sharpening inter-capitalist competition that would soon manifest in a prolonged downturn in profits and productivity, Jordan registers the pivotal, contradictory dynamic at the heart of contemporary capitalism: the self-undermining character of increasing technical development through which, in order to survive competition, individual capitals must narrow the very basis of systemic profitability itself—the exploitation of labor.

Jordan frames that contradiction in a way that lines up two different senses of “value”—value as social custom and value as social relation: the drive for “more” is both a material compulsion and a recognizable good, or “priority” (*culture* is notably absent from these essays). This alignment gives her room to skirt “labor” as a category, preferring instead the algebraic register of “variable” and the humanist one of “people” (who might prove uncontrollable), a choice which places her close to Marx’s “variable capital” but outside the pull of both bourgeois and traditional Marxist understandings of labor that exclude feminized and un-waged work. In contrast to someone like Herbert Marcuse, on the other hand, who argues that the “values of self-propelling productivity, efficiency, and technological rationality” really subsume all human activity under capital (famously rendering capitalism “one dimensional”), Jordan outlines the tendency of “automation” to “eliminate (people) variables,” producing kinds of people—she highlights children and black folks—increasingly superfluous to value creation but still dependent on access to money for survival. Automation in Jordan’s understanding, we might say, intensifies rather than sublimates social and historical contradictions materialized in property and money.

Jordan also gives automation anxiety a Whitmanian twist. The ways in which social and material life in America are sustained and reproduced, Jordan argues, are deathly: “With all due

respect to a well-known, prevailing American value, the most successful American lifestyle should be the one that carries life into death with *maximal efficiency*. This is a paradigm of reasonable, logical, Standard American Procedure (SAP)[.]”<sup>34</sup> The capitalist value relation—imposing on contemporary history a contradictory shape in which the pursuit of profit requires the increasing redundancy of value-producing labor and, by extension, the forms of human life unable to relate positively to it—expresses itself as a socialized death drive:

1. A goal is an end.
2. What is the end of life?
3. Death.
4. What is the goal of life?
5. Death.<sup>35</sup>

Echoing Whitman’s late attachment of American democracy to “the cool enfolding arms of death,” Jordan reverses the values of Whitman’s romanticism. Where Whitman works to wring consolation from historical suffering that can’t quite enter his poetry except as symbol, Jordan presents Whitmanian consolation as the very substance of American life under capital. Jordan thus literalizes Whitman’s poetics of democratic deathliness without a sense that it must somehow be revalorized; it is, rather, the very basis of value as it reigns in and through America. In this accounting, “Standard American Procedure” places those at the edges of value on the side of life itself, with the “Holy Living Spirit” “that has never related to weird things like The Dow Jones Average.” It’s there too, in solidarity with and with love for those “eliminat[ed]. . . from the process of production,” that Jordan stakes herself and her work: “This is the spirit forever opposed to annihilation. . . . Kids are full of the spirit. By definition, they must despise the attributes of death

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<sup>34</sup> Jordan, “More than Enough” (Unpublished Manuscript), June Jordan Papers, box 49, folder 9, page 176.

<sup>35</sup> Jordan, “More than Enough,” 49.9, 176.

so desperately embraced by their elder compatriots. Black people prove that the spirit exists; despite everything, we are here, alive. Somebody needs to just get it together. Put the spirit where the power is.”<sup>36</sup>

Or, put the power where the spirit is. For Jordan, the growing superfluity of so many forms of life to the reproduction of American capitalism wrought by automation makes those superfluous to value newly poised to transform the world. “When the new American casualties of success make their new, people-petitions to the government for aid,” she asks, “what will be the response?”<sup>37</sup> Although state forces had already begun answering this question in terms that would soon become unambiguous, Jordan sees in it the possibility for newly radical horizons: “Something new, wonderful, and affirmative is happening among us,” she avers in a letter reestablishing contact with Fuller: “almost certainly a resurrection of our faith that we can, successfully, consecrate ourselves to the winning and the preservation of good life for everyone.”<sup>38</sup>

For Jordan, however, that consecration no longer means the decontextualized transformation of the cityscape, but rather the radical redistribution of rural land on the basis of self-sustaining communal agriculture: “It is overdue time and a half to undertake the fair and rational redistribution of the land, in Mississippi. I mean, how about tomorrow? Why not? With miserable perfection, Mississippi symbolizes Poor Rich America, and it is here that the transformation of political America, through an equitable redistributing of resources, can be undertaken in a comparatively direct and single-minded way: **SHARE THE EARTH.**”<sup>39</sup> As Mississippi replaces Harlem as the perfect symptom of “Poor Rich America”—or rather, as

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<sup>36</sup> Jordan, “More than Enough,” 49.9, 176, 179.

<sup>37</sup> Jordan, “More than Enough,” 49.9, 179.

<sup>38</sup> Jordan to R. Buckminster Fuller, 14 July 1972, June Jordan Papers, box 49.

<sup>39</sup> Jordan, “More than Enough,” June Jordan Papers, 49.7, page 64



Mississippi/Harlem replaces the city alone—Jordan’s vision of human apotheosis goes head over heels: the skyward reaching characteristic of 1965 here comes down to the ground.

This turn in Jordan’s outlook has gone almost entirely unremarked, even as that more “grounded” Jordan aligns better with our sense of her mature politics. But once noticed and properly described, the move from architecture to land reform begins to make evident the connections across key parts of her writing and biography that otherwise appear as loose ends, including her MFY work in the late 60s and then her trips to the Mississippi Delta in 1969 and 70 and to Rome from 1970-71. Those trips informed not only her land reform writing but also much of her published work from the early 70s, including her children’s biography of Fanny Lou Hamer, her book about the formative impact of Reconstruction on contemporary black life, *Dry Victories* (1972), and her edited volume of black poetry, *Soulscript* (1970) (all of which have fallen out of print). They helped solidify a habit of relational thinking about solidarity, intimacy, and material life that becomes one of the hallmarks of Jordan’s mature work in influential essays like “Civil Wars” and “Letter from the Bahamas,” as well as, I’ll argue, her poetry.

### 3. “EVERYTHING’S *OKAY NOW*”: IMAGINING THE RURAL COMMUNE

Jordan first went to Mississippi in 1969, free-lancing for *The New York Times* and “hoping to shake some warm black hands and glimpse some live black people who are determined to stay, and to direct their own survival, in that place.”<sup>40</sup> Right as much of the rest of the country turned its racial antennae toward northern cities, Jordan went south. There, getting to know the likes of Aaron Shirley—the only black physician in the state and a prominent advocate for armed black self-defense—and Hamer, Jordan was struck by the apparent spontaneity of black freedom struggles:

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<sup>40</sup> Jordan, “Mississippi ‘Black Home,’” *New York Times*, 11 October 1970.

“To my happy surprise, learned [sic] that black people in Mississippi do not share our Northern fascination for labels; nor do they live their lives according to ‘radical’ or ‘bourgeois’ or any other orthodoxy. Against a background of peril, black folk in Mississippi manage to live like people fully formed and fully into life.”<sup>41</sup> This sense of surprise notably contrasts with the feeling in “Skyrise,” that freedom could only come from outside of—or above—Harlem’s living communities. Jordan’s time in Jackson and the Mississippi delta, rather, sparked a clearer sense of the possibilities in and for black self-determination than Harlem did. Autonomous survival in the South, even under the near constant threat of racial terror, offered Jordan an image of what “fully formed” human community might look like: “I think about the days and days spent in black community for the sake of black survival; days of chopping cotton, helping a neighbor drill a well for clean water, sending over some rice and beans and greens to a sick mother. The whole state is like a small town of people who care about one another, and who can do things for each other that will really make a difference. It is not a city.”<sup>42</sup> Much is buried in that final, terse statement. Rural black life presents Jordan with an impression of unmediated self-determining pronouncement. Unlike in Harlem, where the conditions of survival are so opaquely spread among different social strata and political actors, in Mississippi the means of subsistence are latent all around, and the necessary work of self- and social reproduction is evident. The relative scarcity of capital here is not an impediment but an opportunity, opening for Jordan a vista onto emancipation not via elevation, or scaled up industrial development, but through an effort to unhinge wageless life from the wage altogether by seizing the means of subsistence.

Fanny Lou Hamer’s Freedom Farm Cooperative, founded the same year Jordan first went to Mississippi, offered Jordan an image of something unthinkable to Toomer fifty years earlier,

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<sup>41</sup> Jordan, “Mississippi ‘Black Home.’”

<sup>42</sup> Jordan, “Mississippi ‘Black Home.’”

writing amidst crisis, but a crisis characterized by the epochal expansion of capital's absorptive capacities: the possibility of actively struggling to realize black human development in America through self-determination in the countryside. Across the early 1970s, Jordan begins to steep herself in the history of American land reform movements going back to Reconstruction and to actively investigate contemporary rural land use patterns in correspondence with organizers within the broader American land reform movement.<sup>43</sup> She augments this work with study in progressive history and political economy, including the works of Kenneth M. Stamp, John Kenneth Galbraith, and W. E. B. DuBois—especially *Black Reconstruction*. From 1971 on, Jordan undertakes a host of new projects based around land reform, including *Okay Now*, the book-length collection of background essays entitled *More than Enough* that I have been quoting from (the first chapter of which is “Mississippi: Black Home”), and a number of unpublished didactic poems written across the 70s and 80s.<sup>44</sup>

A 1971 outline for *Okay Now*—one of the earliest documents from the project—gives a good measure of the distance Jordan had come not only from “Skyrise” but “47,000 Windows” as well. Spaced on the page like a poem, the outline sketches the plan for the book as it details a

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<sup>43</sup> Amidst Jordan's papers, for instance, is correspondence with Peter Barnes, a leading land reform organizer, and a range of ephemera associated with the land reform movement, some of which Jordan contributed poetry to.

<sup>44</sup> This largely forgotten chapter in Jordan's life and letters also belongs to a broader tendency within the epochal upsurge of black women's writing across the 70s and 80s in which Jordan was a key figure. Galvanized by the rediscovery of Zora Neale Hurston and productive disagreement with more masculinist (and urban) Black Arts tendencies, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, and, later, Toni Morrison, would each turn to the South and to the countryside in order to think afresh about race, gender, and the vicissitudes of black life in America. Indeed, had the 1981 manuscript of *Okay Now* seen publication, it would have taken its place in a recognizable moment, arriving alongside Bambara's *Salt Eaters* (1980) and Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), two movement-defining novels that saw in Southern rural landscapes the ideal grounds for recasting in “womanist” terms the aspirations, fractures, and lingering energies of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Jordan's project would have added an unmistakably polemic note to this chorus, not only imagining the countryside in its ambivalent history but also naming it as the privileged locus for liberation work. Thanks to publisher waffling, Jordan's book never arrived. In 1991, she retitled the project *On Time*, as if in winking insistence that, if the book had missed its initial moment, the occasion for imaging back-to-the-land, revolutionary abolitionism had not passed.

revolutionary sequence organized around autonomous land reform, beginning with the seizing of a former plantation in Ruleville:

Part One is

how they wake up on the first day when land reform,

sharing the earth—this natural thing, this human,

natural thing of feeding each other because we can

do this, the abolition of property in and among

human relations has taken place, has started

in Ruleville, Mississippi

the unemployed, Black sharecropper family of

three daughters, mother and her man, and how they

get up and what they do to go over and join the

cooperative farm a mile and a half around the road

and

Black and white students from Northwestern University

realize that the police will let them alone on the

40 acres they had expropriated from the Senator's

plantation and the problems were those of unexpected

victory.<sup>45</sup>

Jordan imagines a spontaneous movement in which people begin to undo the variegated modes of their separation from the means of reproduction. Consonant with broadly New Left visions of coalition, the protagonists of this movement compose a motley array of social fragments variously

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<sup>45</sup> Jordan, "Book Proposal" (Unpublished Manuscript. August 1971), June Jordan Papers, box 49, folder 5, page 3.

situated in relation to value production and the wage, including especially service workers, the un- and semi-waged—from housewives to sharecroppers to students—and younger white-collar professionals. But for Jordan, “sharing the earth” especially means de-populating the racialized geographies of combined unevenness, “the slums / abandoned by the poor, and dessicated [sic] suburbs / suddenly fluid suddenly leaking freedom”: “Part Two is about the Black folks different Black folks and families and how they get ready and leave Brownsville in Brooklyn, and what they leave, and why they leave, and what they feel and wonder and hope and have and carry with them as they get out, Wagontrain to Mississippi, in this and that car caravans on ABC/CBS/Channel 13 and also on Highway 95, from Brownsville to the 500 acres waiting for them down in Ruleville, Mississippi[.]”<sup>46</sup>

Dealing with “the problems ... of unexpected / victory,” the planned novel is post-apocalyptic, in a literal sense, without being utopian, in a literal sense. Instead, it tries to imagine the contradictions, possibilities, pleasures, and conditions of this communalizing practice as it “takes place”: “The New Ruleville in New mississippi-america will have probably no schools and no parents and no husbands and no wives and no profits and child care and compounds (domino compounds of intrinsic flexibility,) tent neighborhoods and work and goals and sex and love and illness and health and hard, but not impossible, relations to the nation outside.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, it hypothetically includes a whole section of extra-diegetic research and polemic, and then imagines concluding with fictionalized records of the internal fractures, partial successes, government surveillance reports, and records of state repression that would inevitably face such an undertaking.

The strange narrative and documentary situation that Jordan outlines for the novel is doubled in the poetic voice of the book proposal itself. In this strange half-poem about a still

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<sup>46</sup> Jordan, “Book Proposal,” 5.

<sup>47</sup> Jordan, “Book Proposal,” 5.

largely imagined novel, Jordan speaks from a position simultaneously before and after a successful global movement to liberate capital's hinterlands:

It was come. It was happening. Like and unlike China, Cuba, [Tanzania,] Italy, Vietnam, southern California, Tuckaway, Vermont, a hundred years ago, a thousand years ago, ten years from now, for sure, a hundred years from now, perhaps, it was happening, [~~immediately~~, today and] here.

Some people thought it was overnight. But really it had taken several weeks or half a century or multi-scattered split-seconds, all depending, to take place.

.....

Let me touch your tongue with mine; this is a novel about how the hunger got stopped. You reading about it. You already knew. You and we and I knew we always know how to. Never been the problem. (How to.) We found out. We learned at last about you and no hungering and so the newtimes started up, but small, and here and there, and almost slowly.<sup>48</sup>

Here to be *in* the struggle is also at once somehow to be on the other side of it, even if the other side is just being back at work. Or rather, there are no sides to the present/abiding struggle for “no / hungering.” Instead, the book imagined by the poem produces its own occasion for existing: “And then, forget it. We’re doing it. It has come to us. Now. Everything’s *Okay Now*; we learned.

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<sup>48</sup> Jordan, “Book Proposal,” 1-2.

In truth, the breast is outfront, and the body is the host-world of the spirit of us, rising, calm.”<sup>49</sup>

Figured in the plea for intimate contact (“Let me touch your tongue with mine”) is a horizon of revolutionary longing around which elsewheres and elsewhens—both past and future—gather, comprising a here-and-now of possibility for building collective abundance. The record of that here-and-now is the book Jordan wants you to imagine preparing to read or, somehow, already having read: “You reading about / it. You already knew.”

The scrambling of time and place, the collision of simultaneity, timeliness, and far-flung belatedness in this remarkable document speaks to an emergent shape in Jordan’s political thinking: a long-distance solidarity founded in the various ways that capitalist development has closed people off from possibilities for human fulfillment and answered by the immediacy of struggles for material self-determination. For Jordan, “land reform” names an avenue toward undoing the relations to value (efficiency-money-death) that separate people from themselves and each other: “PART THREE is about why it happened... the rage, the rage, the rage, and the recognition of the many, infinite, others, raging, and alone, and able to feed, to eat, to live, to love, to fight, and to kill the evil, sick, crippling, rulers of our universal, me and not-me misery.”<sup>50</sup>

Equally as far from the technocratic impulse of “Skyrise” as from the reformist sardony of “47,000 Windows,” *Okay Now* offers “four or five / line drawings of the newlife tent mobility and / access and the common ground and the previously / single figures moving round and rhythmic through / the truly changing hours / yes.”<sup>51</sup>

In Jordan’s published writing, little of her interest in revolutionary land redistribution appears explicitly, even as it shapes much of her archive across the 1970s, a pivotal period in her

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<sup>49</sup> Jordan, “Book Proposal,” 6.

<sup>50</sup> Jordan, “Book Proposal,” 6.

<sup>51</sup> Jordan, “Book Proposal.”

life. Yet the apocalyptic humanism that shapes it and the poetics of revolutionary intimacy that moves through it become important features of Jordan's writing across the rest of her career, even as her political points of reference change. Both emerge in Jordan's effort to orient her writing toward the material conditions of struggle and everyday life—particularly among those fighting to survive on the edges of the formal wage relation. With more space, I would want to show how this stream of Jordan's attention coincides with her thinking, writing, and activism around Black English, a claim to which *His Own Where*, *Dry Victories*, and other of Jordan's writing from this period readily attest. For the purposes of the present argument, however, I focus on how Jordan's attention to the dynamics of combined and uneven development and the yawning crisis in the wage evident by the late 60s animates her love poetry. It should be seen as telling, in this regard, that Jordan's 1971 outline for her novel *Okay Now* takes on the guise of a love poem, turning the morning-after logic of the aubade toward the thought of autonomous social regeneration. The poetry Jordan wrote while in Rome, I'll argue next, turns to a different genre—the love elegy—unexpectedly well suited to the relation between city and countryside beginning to occupy Jordan's attention. In ways resonant with her 1971 book proposal, Jordan's Roman poems strive to articulate a deictic address adequate to the combined unevenness of human relation under capital.

#### 4. JUNE JORDAN'S ROMAN LOVE ELEGY

"Listen it helps to travel from America," Jordan insists in *More than Enough*. "Then the deliberate, unnecessary nature of American grief becomes apparent":

Just traveling to Greece and along the Amalfi Coastline of Italy, south of Naples, you suddenly appreciate the unforgivable absurdity of hunger in Mississippi. Take the Greek Island of Mykonos: if there were revolution tomorrow afternoon, even if the kindly, rugged shepherds should displace the colonels and their dictatorial lieutenants, the breakfast bread and honey of the island people would remain a difficulty. These people must carry on their struggle right on the top of a literal



rock: Rock is hard to dent for bread and honey. But there's Mississippi, on the other side of the earth, forever ready for food and for flowers, forever everywhere a green and rolling contrast to the life-repulsion of a rock-terrain.<sup>52</sup>

On the heels of her trips to Mississippi, Jordan went to Rome in the Fall of 1970 as a Rome Prize recipient. Set in relation, Southern Europe sharpens the contradictory appearance of material poverty and natural wealth in the Mississippi Delta. Here, that contrast registers poetically, or at least sonically, between the *l's*, *o's*, and *ev's* of the Mississippi landscapes and the Greek isle's hard *c's* and awkward compound nouns. From this comparative vantage, Jordan wrote a suite of loose love elegies around the city of Rome. Consistently broken up in her selected poetry volumes, Jordan viewed this group of seventeen "Roman Poem[s]" as a sequential unit, as the 1974 volume *New Days: Poems of Exile and Return* (reprinted in her collected poems) makes clear. The poems are by turns detached and amorous, wry and passionate; voiced by a self-consciously American tourist in Rome, they are full of lovers, friends, and stock Roman characters. Rarely read by scholars, they interleave passionate love with the urban fabric of Rome and the geopolitical economy of the contemporary Mediterranean, setting distant times and places in relation by juxtaposing conversation, anecdote, and intimacy. In so doing, these poems formalize Jordan's evolving understanding of development, survival, and contradiction in a situated, humanist sensitivity to the dislocated times and spaces of a combined and uneven totality entering crisis.

In their integration of desire and place—particularly Rome—Jordan's Roman poems also, and somewhat unexpectedly, mobilize the distant echo of the Roman love elegy, a genre identified in its initial formation with a handful of poets active at the same time in Rome (50-1 BCE)—including especially Propertius, Ovid, and Tibullus—and then given a modern after-life by Goethe and Friedrich Schiller. At first blush, placing Jordan in a line of reception that includes the likes of

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<sup>52</sup> Jordan, "More than Enough," 63, 49.7.

Ovid, Propertius, and Goethe may seem a tad fanciful, given not only the vast distances in history and experience that separate the poets but also the unlikely image such a lineage might conjure—of Jordan as a neoclassicist, say. That image is not what I’m after. Rather, I want to argue that Jordan’s poems activate the Roman love elegy’s resonances as a genre of *transition*—political and economic transition especially, but also urban-rural transition, more particularly. Increasingly concerned with grasping an emancipatory politics oriented by the racialized unevenness wrought by capitalist accumulation, the habits and histories of the love elegy afford Jordan a way to think site-specific, but multiply mediated human relation that cuts across public and private space.

The Roman love elegy is a wobbly term. Its headline practitioners picked up the already vague Greek form of the elegiac distich—couplets in alternating hexameter and pentameter—and reworked its occasion from funereal lament to erotic desire. Its many scholarly and poetic readers since have come to know it in turn as a porous genre in which the amorous poetic persona details their (most often his) extreme devotion to the beloved in book-length, shorter-verse series. While the love of the Roman love elegies is more passionate than philosophical and more often hopeless than consummated, the genre is remarkable for its ability to fold poetic reflection and world-making into the arch feelings of the erotic love poem. Tonally, this bends the form as much to lamentation and satire as to ecstasy, be it remembered or imagined. But beyond these standard markers, one of the most striking features of the Latin love elegies is their frankly urban imaginary. Written contemporaneously with Augustus’s consolidation of power, the Latin love elegies map the rapidly changing character of Rome in frank erotic verses populated by characters pulled from elite society. The lovers of Tibullus, Ovid, and Propertius rendezvous in or in the shadows of monuments and neighborhoods recently built as part of a wave of urban development intended to

consolidate the centrality of Rome and, through it, the authority of Augustus.<sup>53</sup> The newly imperial city, fed by increasingly far-flung territories, organizes the elegies as both their setting and subject, a mediating screen for a semi-public *eros* capable of sustaining serial poetic worlds. Indeed, the jealous, forbidden, satirical, and tortured desires of the elegists are so intimately bound up with the urban fabric of Rome that the city itself might be understood as “the poet’s true beloved.”<sup>54</sup> With the empire actively under construction, the Roman love elegy, one might say, turned a fragmentary image of the Greek mourning song into the occasion for thinking classical “urban renewal.”

Jordan’s series, however, voiced by an American tourist, accesses the Roman love elegy through the mediation of later poetic passers-through Southern Italy, especially Goethe and Schiller.<sup>55</sup> In arguably the deepest and most sustained modern engagement with the Roman love elegy, the Weimar Classicists turned to the eternal city and its distinctive poetic genre to develop a contemporary poetic form that could embody the civilizational claims of the budding Weimar renaissance. Goethe’s second elegy from his *Erotica Romana* (1795) is exemplary of these concerns:

Tell me ye stones and give me O glorious palaces answer.  
Speak O ye streets but one word. Genius, art thou alive?

Yes, here within thy sanctified walls there’s a soul in each object,  
ROMA eternal. For me, only, are all things yet mute.

Who will then tell me in whispers and where must I find just the window

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<sup>53</sup> Tara S. Welch details over 20 new monuments built by Augustus or his family in addition to the 80 plus reconstruction projects. Alongside these projects, Augustus oversaw large-scale neighborhood reconstruction: “The new Augustan city was comprised of distinct and comprehensible urban zones—a leisure district in the Campus Martius with baths, poritcoes, even a lake; a gentrified ‘Plebian Quarter’ on the Aventine. . . ; a symbolic and tour-able ‘White House’ complex on the Palatine with attached public spaces. . . ; ‘Dynastyland,’ which used to be the Forum Romanum; and a brand-new civic zone, the Forum Augustum, that surrounded lawmakers and officials with life-sized models of past glory and a huge model for the divine instigator and enabler of Augustus’ power, Mars the Avenger” (“Elegy and the Monuments,” in *A Companion to Roman Love Elegy*, ed. Barbara K. Gold [London: Blackwell, 2012], 104).

<sup>54</sup> Welch, 103.

<sup>55</sup> Jordan herself invokes Goethe in a letter discussing the poems in her archive. Unfortunately, I lost the record of this mention and have not been able to get back to Radcliffe to track it down again.

Where one day she'll be glimpsed: creature who'll scorch me with love?

Can't I divine yet the paths through which over and over  
To her and from her I'll go, squandering valuable time?

Visiting churches and palaces, all of the ruins and the pillars,  
I, a responsible man, profit from making this trip.

With my business accomplished, ah, then shall only one temple,  
AMOR's temple alone, take the initiate in.

Rome, thou art a whole world, it is true, and yet without love this  
World would not be the world, Rome would cease to be Rome.<sup>56</sup>

Here—as his contemporaries immediately recognized—are all the ingredients of the classical Latin love elegy in a modern language: not just the markers of the city and the lover and the longed-for beloved, but the reflective logic that coordinates them in a self-making poetic speaker. “ROMA” and “AMOR” become flip sides of the same poetic coin, which then serves as immaterial currency for this “responsible man” to buy back antiquity and so become a poetic “Genius.” Rome and the passionate love it makes possible in and as elegy thereby offer a direct means of claiming the revived classical inheritance sought by Goethe and his peers. Indeed, as Theodor Ziolkowski has argued, Goethe’s collection of Roman love elegies prototyped a rigorous model capable of bearing the new world-historical feeling of German aesthetics into poetry.<sup>57</sup> Goethe’s Rome, meanwhile, is decidedly and explicitly Augustan, which is also to say elegiac; it is the Rome of the temples and monuments reanimated by a doubled poetic and amorous union—of the poet with the classical world by way of the beloved, and of the classical distich with modern German.

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<sup>56</sup> Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, *Erotica Romana* (The Floating Press, 2013), 5.

<sup>57</sup> See Theodore Ziolkowski, *Classical German Elegy, 1795-1950* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), 55-64. In Ziolkowski’s account, Goethe’s Roman elegies laid the basis for the classical German elegy more broadly. Goethe’s successful experiments with the famously difficult distich form, and the striking sense that he had managed to write Latin love elegies in German, helped winnow the vague and disparate ingredients of elegy itself.

Historically, however, the animus for Goethe's poetic Rome is not so much the city at all—be it real or imagined, modern or antique—as the countryside. As Legation Councilor in the privy council of Charles August, Duke of Saxe-Weimar, Goethe spent much of the late 1770s and '80s in the thick of political and class struggles around princely authority, burgher rights, and landed privileges, all framed by the continuing fragmentation of the Holy Roman Empire, the fitful emancipation of the serfs, and struggles to rationalize agrarian production still largely polarized between large estates and small peasant holdings.<sup>58</sup> Having written his first play about the German Peasant Wars of the fifteenth century, Goethe found himself just a few years later adjudicating punishments against recalcitrant peasants across the far flung territories of Weimar-Saxe.<sup>59</sup> Goethe's elegiac consciousness took seed in the Italian journey he went on in 1786-88 in the immediate aftermath of his departure from court and the stifling atmosphere of his administrative duties in the German countryside. But the poems themselves were finished only upon his return to Weimar. Rome's overriding literary quality in the elegies, in other words, emerges only in its negative relation to the actual clamor of the bygone empire's northern backwaters, the land "Far back there in the north, wrapped in a grayish light" upon which the poems were themselves written.<sup>60</sup> In order for Goethe to hear the ancient "streets" of elegiac Rome, he first had to tune out the political noise of the estates. If what we might call Roman Elegy 1, then, remade a distant poetic ruin in time with the transformation of Rome itself, Roman Elegy 2 looks to the literary image of the Augustan city amidst ongoing transformations in the countryside.

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<sup>58</sup> See W. H. Brummford, *Germany in the Eighteenth Century: The Social Background of the Literary Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1968).

<sup>59</sup> See W. Daniel Wilson, "Goethe and the Political World," in *Cambridge Companion to Goethe*, ed. Lesley Sharpe (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 209-13.

<sup>60</sup> Goethe, 18.

Juxtaposing passionate love and the city of Rome, Jordan's poems activate these generic pressures in light of their own circumstances. True to form, they begin precisely with space, desire, and a monument:

1

Only my own room is gray

from morning on  
those high those closing windows  
may divide

to make an open wall

(that's maybe nine or ten feet tall)

and when you pull up the wooden blinds  
the outdoor cypress trees  
confront  
consume  
caress the (relatively small and starving eyes  
that mark your face

for love

2

How old is Jesus?

for example well

the dark bronze fountain boy

(behold him)

wet  
perpetual

the running water slides his belly loose  
the snake around his arm  
supplies the slick delectable  
the difference

the dry parts where his hard

fat fingers never reach

the area where early light  
or late

the boy is there alone

and listening to a sound that is

not his

(*DD*, 87-88)

As the blinds of the bedroom go up to reveal beloved and city—or beloved in light of the city—Jordan transmutes her lover’s body into the fountain sculpture outside. “The dark bronze fountain boy,” naked monument to Rome’s famed subterranean infrastructure of water and rock, is beheld by the poet and doubly beheld by the reader, who is enjoined to see both the sculpture itself and the sculpture as the poet sees it, or “him,” her lover. This act of transmutation between parts 1 and 2 also externalizes the passing moment in the bedroom at dawn, turning the transitory illumination of the beloved’s face into an enduring, public spectacle, in which “early light / or late / the boy is there.” The next poem in the sequence follows this inside-out movement by literally moving into the streets:

Toward the end of twenty minutes  
we come to a still standing archway  
in the city dump  
nearby the motorcycle the tree-trunk garbage  
on the heavy smelling ground

as laurel bay leaves  
(grecian laurel) break into

a heavy smell

(*DD*, 88)

Here, in a recognizably elegiac turn, the poet in the streets of Rome finds not only love but her own poetic license, as the city’s contemporary, open-air metabolism proves to be fertilizer for

poetic growth dating back a cool millennium or two, the “city dump” the ideal site for “(grecian laurel).” Like a good Roman elegist, that is, Jordan sees the streets of Rome as the ideal ground for the Greek lyric legacy bound up with love and poetry.

But the Rome that Jordan encounters is not the city of either Propertius or Goethe, and the Greece that comes to mind is not that of antiquity, at least not only that. Rather, Jordan’s Rome is a contemporary city undergoing changes not altogether dissimilar from those determining life in New York. Moving on from the dump with Grecian laurel in hand, the poet’s attention turns in the next lines to her companions, a pair of lovers who are, like the poet herself, new to the city:

Nicholas and Florence sharp last night  
in life without an urban crisis that be-  
longs to you

no demon in the throat of them  
but someone just a harping on  
the silence

(DD, 88)

Instead of the classical city, Jordan’s love elegy belongs to “this wonderful / Italian little Italian slum” (DD, 89). At the same time, Roman love elegy is made possible by the poet’s peculiar separation from the local manifestations of the same pressures (“urban crisis”) that drove her from New York. The “urban crisis” is here, the same but different, product of the geographically distinct manifestation of similar systemic pressures.<sup>61</sup> Jordan’s poem registers this peculiar experience in a jarring rearrangement of pronouns, through which the lyric “you” appears unexpectedly attached to the third person and the displaced “them” takes on the character of the poetic singer. The

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<sup>61</sup> Like in the U.S., for instance, the long tail-end of “nitrogen capitalism” was pulling millions from the southern Italian countryside to Rome and to the northern industrial centers of Milan and Turin. See, for instance, Jonathan Dunnage, *Twentieth Century Italy: A Social History* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 148-196. On the “urban crisis” in the context of Southern Italy, see Judith Chubb, *Patronage, Power, and Poverty in Southern Italy: A Tale of Two Cities* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982), 178-210.



observed couple effectively reflects back to the poet her own conditions in a foreign city, throat loosened for poetry “Without an urban crisis” that belongs to her.

In a way, Jordan inverts the Goethean position. Here, Roman love elegy reveals rather than obscures the historicity of poetic feeling. Elsewhere in the series, for instance, a quiet morning with a friend over coffee is set up for the historical violence of the Greek junta:

The tiny electrical coffee pot  
takes a long time to make  
toy bubbles of hot water while  
we wait we laugh a lot in a stiff  
and a stuffy chair jokes about the world  
the war the regular material for  
belly laughing through  
and “By the way  
do you know anyone in Greece? I have/  
I had some friends who went there after  
the coup. But they have not  
written suddenly  
for several months and the telephone  
operator says that no  
such persons as  
The Cacoullous  
exist.”

–“If you give me the stamps  
I will write to somebody who can find out  
if your friends are still alive or what.”  
I hand over the stamps.  
It is a good thing sometimes  
to buy a few extra.

(*DD*, 91)

Where love allows Goethe to ventriloquize the streets of Rome as a stand-in for classical civilization writ large, Jordan finds that the altogether contemporary life of the Mediterranean imposes its own force on the relationship among poet, city, and those she comes in contact with. While quietly counter-balancing three different scales of communication—friendly dialog, official state correspondence, informal epistolary networks—this little poem ends up staging the failure of

direct address: the poet cannot speak to whom she wishes. In the face of the over-arching power of state repression, the poem can only offer its bathetic wisdom as an index for the mundanity of the speaker's position in history. This is also to say that the typical scene of lyric overhearing here takes shape around material constraints on the typically elegiac relation of the here-and-now to other times and places, a pattern that recurs across the sequence of Roman poems.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, the typically urban character of the Roman love elegy radiates outward in Jordan's poems toward wider correspondences; waking and loving in Rome is braced by the poet's relation to friends suffering political repression in Greece, the relative immiseration of people in the U.S. and Italy, and the price of stamps.

Elsewhere in the sequence, this sensitivity toward one's position in a spatially uneven totality shapes the supposedly private world of intimate love. Intimacy itself, in fact, is often figured in and as movement—not from or toward the speaker's interiority, but in and out of porous relation with people and the world. As they move back and forth between world and bedroom, Jordan's quotidian Roman poems imagine a sense of intimacy and desire that is at once flexible, public and non-tragic:

After dinner we take to the streets  
 let the alleys lead us as they will  
 into darkness and doorways  
 regardless  
 we scratch through the city hot  
 with wine  
 our feet our legs as steady  
 as a kiss on the wall.

(*DD*, 93)

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<sup>62</sup> "Roman Poem Number Four's" concern with messages getting delivered across vast distances, for instance, reverberates in poems on either side of it: anticipating Jordan's look back at Mississippi from the Amalfi Coast in *More than Enough*, "Roman Poem Number Three" reports another speaker's blithe comparison between "our poor. . . [and] yours" (*DD*, 90), while "Roman Poem Number Six" gauges the distance between Italy and the Caribbean in "the weight the price / of letters / packages / and special post cards" (*DD*, 92).

Instead of being always-already violated by the foreknowledge that the outside world will destroy the refuge of the lover's chamber, Jordan's lovers can simply move into the streets—"let the alleys lead us as they will"—and intimacy can simply migrate from lovers toward friends and strangers, those "separate bodies / separated" (*DD*, 100). Indeed, physical love is strikingly public in Jordan's Roman poems. While the bedroom is site for the intimacy of voices turning toward and away from each other ("your voice / breaks very close to me my love" [*DD*, 98]) poems 5, 7, 8, and 11 stage physical love outside, in the streets, squares, beaches, and cafes of Rome: "Spring has not arrived / and we already share / a beach that is a bed" (*DD*, 96). This itinerant choreography of intimacy emerges partly by way of the Roman love elegy as a genre, in which the public space of the city is not so much a foil to but a staging area or even a third partner in the poet's love affairs. But it is also, I think, where we can see Jordan's theoretical and practical attention to combined and uneven development enter her poetry.

The full scope of Jordan's project in her Roman poems gathers in "Roman Poem Number 5," the longest and most consistently selected of the group. Spanning 15 pages in the collected poems, "Roman Poem Number Five" combines the features of Roman love elegy largely distributed among the other shorter poems while extending their range, so to speak. The poem follows Jordan and her lover in a group of strangers on tours of Pompeii and Herculaneum, while the itinerary of the group—and Jordan's love affair—serve as the vehicles for extended poetic reflection on place, history, and living amidst apocalyptic change. Composed in the collage-like method that characterizes much of Jordan's 70s poetry, "Roman Poem Number 5" navigates an uneven topography comprised of civilizational, geologic, and political-economic layers preserved by the cataclysmic disaster of Vesuvius's eruption.

In its subject, the poem directly nods to one of Schiller's attempts at Roman love elegy in his "Pompeii and Herculaneum," which, much like Goethe's Roman elegy 2, tries to revivify

classical civilization by force of the poet's love language. While Jordan's poem—like Schiller's—conflates erotic love with poetic excavation, however, what the poetic subject discovers is not so much a reborn universal history as the particularly layered and striated topographies of the present crisis entombed in the earth's destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum's human societies. In the penultimate section of the poem, for instance, the group arrives at Herculaneum only to have contemporary history intrude on their tour:

there it is baby there it is  
FURTHER EXCAVATION INTO  
HERCULANEUM  
ARRESTED TODAY BY RESSINI living  
inhabitants impoverished the non-  
descript Ressini town on top the  
ruins the

amazing Herculaneum  
constructed on an earlier rehearsal flow  
of lava maybe  
courage or like that a seashore  
a resort the remnant spread the  
houses under houses  
tall trees underlying grass the  
pine and palm trees spring toward  
Ressini grass retaining walls against the water  
where there is no water and the sound of children  
crying from which city is it Ressini is it  
Herculaneum that  
does not matter does it is it  
the living or the visited the living or  
the honored ERCOLANO

(DD, 114)

This passage cuts a complex cross-section out of the stratified topography of the poem's surroundings. "Ressini" is Jordan's mistaken appellation for Resina, the name of the post-Classical town built on top of Herculaneum, which was renamed Ercolano in honor of its ancient predecessor right around the time of Jordan's visit. Here, the poor of "RESSINI living" descend

on Herculaneum and disrupt the ongoing excavation of the Roman ruins. The poetic consciousness, meanwhile, continues her own excavation of the area. She does so, however, in a kind of distant solidarity with the “non-/descript” modern town, seeking to picture the slowly moving historical and ecological pressures—the “houses under houses,” the “pine and palm trees spring[ing]” up from the grasses below the seawall—brought to bear on and by the “living / inhabitants impoverished.” Resina in Jordan’s poem is subjected to the weight of the accumulated matter it is built upon, the material past literally undermining the living present as the ruins become more important than the area residents’ own conditions of survival:

INFORMATION  
WAS  
NOT AVAILABLE  
THE POOR  
OF RESSINI  
REFUSE  
TO COOPERATE  
WITH AUTHORITIES

you better watch out  
next summer  
and Rellini gone slide

down inside them fancy  
stones and stay there  
using  
flashlight  
or whatever

NOBODY BUDGE  
KEEP MOVING KEEP MOVING

(*DD*, 114)

Forced to move on from Herculaneum, the poet imagines a different kind of apocalypse than the volcano’s, and a different kind of classical revival than Schiller’s: part landslide, part return of the repressed—here the living on the dead—“THE POOR / OF RESSINI” remake the Classical town as their own.

This movement anticipates the ending of *His Own Where*, albeit at a larger scale, in which Buddy and Angela move into a mausoleum in the middle of a Brooklyn cemetery to make their new, emancipated lives together. It also, however, picks up on the underlying generic consciousness of Roman love elegy outlined above, in which literary classicism across the centuries screens the material tensions of town and country through the poetic self-fashioning of the urban love poet. Jordan comes to Rome and the Roman love elegy, however, with an increasing sensitivity to the heaving transition of rural populations across the globe in an Italy increasingly distant from the “economic miracle” of postwar reconstruction.<sup>63</sup> Across the 60s, especially, waves of de-peasantization across the South began to swell the population of Italian cities at the same time as the level of industrial development narrowed the basis for employment, producing what one scholar has called “modernization without development,” or combination without growth.<sup>64</sup> These shifting economic and demographic forces produced new social tensions, headlined by Italy’s belated “hot autumn” from 1969-70, but also manifest in a wave of discontent across the rural south, where programs for land reform and economic development had run aground on the ebbing tides of growth.<sup>65</sup> The social world of the Mezzogiorno that Jordan encountered in the ruins around Naples, that is to say, was one increasingly characterized by high un- and under-employment, as the course of industrial development “transferred the overpopulation problem from the countryside to the cities.”<sup>66</sup> In “Roman Poem Number 5,” “THE POOR / OF RESSINI” suddenly interject the underlying contradictions of Italian political economy into the field of the love elegy, breaking through in paratactic blocks rather than the neat rhythms of the elegiac distich. Jordan presents this clash in terms of distinct geographical strata that bear with them a conflict

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<sup>63</sup> Although far less successful than Japan and Germany in the long run, the Italian economy took a similar leap forward after the war on the basis of Marshall Plan-led combined development.

<sup>64</sup> Chubb, 28.

<sup>65</sup> See Andrea Lorenzo Capussela, *The Political Economy of Italy’s Decline* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018), esp. 122-69.

<sup>66</sup> Chubb, 29.

between the living and the dead. This is also to say that Jordan, retooling the Roman love elegy with her vernacular sense of immiseration's dislocated times and places, attunes the genre to the seismic movements of totality at the level of everyday life and intimate relation.

Indeed, in Jordan's hands, the love elegy's fusion of desire, lament, and reflection renders intimacy a way of knowing the many worldly mediations of life fixed by property. Punctuating the tour's meandering route through the layered apocalyptic topographies of the region are moments of amorous summons in which the poetic speaker is called into the scene by contact with the beloved:

come to Pompeii  
touch my tongue with yours  
study the cold formulation of a fearful fix  
grid patterns to the streets  
the boundaries "unalterable"

the rights of property in stone  
the trapezoidal plot the signals  
of possession

(*DD*, 111)

Against but also within the group of tourists, the physical intimacy between poetic speaker and her lover offers another way of "study[ing]" the scene, of bringing to life the attenuated links across deep temporal and spatial divisions all running through the momentary tangent of bodies in touch.

"Roman Poem Number 5" thereby gives the clearest impression of a theme common to the whole series, and, indeed to much of Jordan's later poetry: that poetic desire can focalize and holds open a discernible if temporary point of human contact on an otherwise uneven, unstable, and often unjust topography of relation. "This is a trip that strangers make," the poem begins,

a journey ending on the beach where things  
come together like four fingers on his  
rather predictable  
spine exposed by stars and  
.....

you know  
we were both out of the water  
both out of it  
and really what we wanted was  
to screw ourselves into  
the place

(*DD*, 103-104)

“To screw ourselves into / the place” could read as the headline for the love elegy as Jordan writes it. An expansive, promiscuous and public intimacy—underwritten by but not coextensive with physical love—holds open a here and now structured by asymmetrical relations to other times and places. It bears emphasizing, in this respect, that “place” for Jordan functions less as ontic grounding than as a point of passionate, human orientation within the larger overlapping forces of social, historical, and geological relation. Indeed, these lines recall Jordan’s insistence in her 1964 letter to Fuller that “Skyrise” model a “theory of place in terms of human being.” The Roman poems use the language of erotic poetry to articulate a similar theory, a “*where*” that is made coextensive with the needs of human relation:

*I am not here for you and I will stay there*  
we are disturbing the peace of the graveyard and  
that is the believable limit of our impact  
our intent  
no  
tonight he will hold me hard on the rocks of the ground  
if the weather is warm and if  
it doesn’t rain

(*DD*, 108)

Treading through the ruins of Pompeii, Herculaneum (nearly), and Paestum, “notic[ing] the mosaic decorations / of a coffin” (*DD*, 107), passionate love enlivens the immediacy of a “place” that is not strictly located except in the act of coming together (“*I am not here for you and I will stay there*”; “touch my tongue with yours”). At the same time, that act bears the kernel of a more radical desire, a longing for “the truly changing hours” of “the hoped-for apocalypse”: “And so I



continue: a Black woman who would be an agent for change, an active member of the hoped-for apocalypse. I am somebody seeking to make, or to create, revolutionary connections between the full identity of my love, of what hurts me, or fills me with nausea, and the way things are” (*CW*, 101).

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Reflecting on her career at what would end up being its approximate mid-point, Jordan in 1980 puts things this way:

My life seems to be an increasing revelation of the intimate face of universal struggle. You begin with your family and the kids on the block, and next you open your eyes to what you call your people and that leads you into land reform into Black English into Angola leads you back to your own bed where you lie by yourself, wondering if you deserve to be peaceful, or trusted or desired or left to the freedom of your own unfaltering heart. (*CW*, “Foreward”)

At one level, this circuit from family to land reform to Angola to bedroom reads as a developmental arc—as the stages of Jordan’s career. And in some ways that’s accurate. But I think it more aptly describes the continual challenge and opportunity posed by Jordan’s writing in any given work. It’s not just the sheer variety of her writing and activism—from her children’s literature to her pedagogy to her Third Worldism to her black feminism; it’s that this variety is organized not around a single category—language, democracy, or gender—so much as the historical relation between value and survival as conditioned by the unfolding history of human separation under the capitalist law of value.

Jordan’s poems and essays read like urgent exercises in running the gamut described above in order to keep up with the occasions through which that relation moves: how to get from Fidel’s

1979 visit to New York to Jordan's son in Nebraska to guerilla warfare and back ("Poem of Personal Greeting for Fidel"), or from the Yale classroom to Santiago, Chile to Attica Prison ("On the Occasion of a Clear and Present Danger at Yale"), or from "Mississippi more / or less through Virginia in order to pack and get back to / New York on her way to the People's Republic of / Angola" ("1978"), without ever leaving the immediacy of the embodied present.

Over the course of the late 70s and into the 80s, especially, Jordan will increasingly frame her work and poetry within a wider Third Worldist purview, which seeks to articulate solidarities across various scenes of oppression and struggle—from the U.S. to Angola to Bosnia and Palestine. This habit or method emerges first and most clearly early in Jordan's career, across her evolving effort to grasp the forces of material and human immiseration that linked the riots of the mid-60s to the migration of the 50s to the vagaries of capitalist development and land-owning patterns from the 1870s on. In this respect, Jordan's movement from city to countryside that I have charted above lays the groundwork for the later movement from the U.S. to the world. In her Roman love elegies, we get something like the first attempt to write poems magnetized by these concerns, in which the generic emplotment of poetic love in a particular place and time allows the poet to feel the very non-locality of any here-and-now mediated by the occasions of life under capital.

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