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TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ADAPTATIONS OF EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN PROTEST LITERATURE

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky

By
Kathryn J. McClain
Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Jeffory Clymer, Professor of English
Lexington, Kentucky
2022

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ADAPTATIONS
OF EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY
AMERICAN PROTEST LITERATURE

Twenty-First Century Adaptations of Early Twentieth Century American Protest Literature examines the resurgence of didactic political literature in the United States during the 21st century, specifically adaptations of early 20th century American leftist protest works by authors such as Upton Sinclair, Jack London, and Richard Wright. While the most political aspects of these writers' fiction are often either criticized as too politically overt – such as Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Wright's *Native Son* – or forgotten in favor of an author's perceived literary merit – London's *The Iron Heel* in comparison to his other works like *Call of the Wild* – this project argues that contemporary adaptations of such didactic political works show an effort to accomplish previously unmet political goals and ideals. In effect, these contemporary didactic adaptations seek to recognize continued political failures in the United States because political reforms written about 100 years earlier remain unaddressed; additionally, these works push toward constant adaptation in the new century as a recognition of inequalities specific to a 21st century American citizenry. A previous so-called narrative of failure is adapted instead to a newly revitalized narrative, and a rejection of primarily faithful adaptations alone invites complex interrogation about the influences of changeable political stories.

KEYWORDS: American Literature, Adaptation Studies, Political Literature, Leftist Politics, Didacticism

Kathryn J. McClain
April 13th, 2022

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ADAPTATIONS OF EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN PROTEST LITERATURE

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INTRODUCTION

"A NEW BEGINNING": AN INTRODUCTION TO 21ST CENTURY ADAPTATIONS OF 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN PROTEST LITERATURE

In 2019, *Eugene V. Debs: A Graphic Novel* was released after an increased interest in leftist American history and political narratives during the previous decade. The novel outlines the famous socialist's political stances as well as his run for President of the United States in 1912, during which he received nearly 1 million votes as a third-party candidate (28). In addition, the novel is consciously framed as a response to contemporaneous public interest in socialism and its previously unreached possibilities in the United States. As the graphic novel states,

> The life of Eugene Victor Debs (1855-1926) has returned to public interest in ways that no one would have expected five or ten years ago. 'Socialism,' contrary to liberal and conservative pronouncements, has made a comeback. The political campaign of Bernie Sanders during 2015-2016, appealing to millions of young people but not them only, shocked the mainstream, Democrats as well as Republicans. The Wall Street crash of 2008, and the mass movements of Occupy [Wall Street] and Black Lives Matter, almost seemed to have called a movement and a charismatic leader into being. […] The idea of democratic socialism has been growing in popularity as the grim reality of capitalism, by vivid contrast, has grown ever more clear, especially among the young. This might be seen as the payoff – a new beginning – for the historic movements of American socialism. Perhaps the socialist ancestors, from every ethnic and racial group, are smiling down on today's socialists… and those of tomorrow. (xi, 104)

Clearly, the graphic novel argues that the previous decade had engaged Americans toward leftism in a manner not known for nearly 100 years. The recollection of Debs situates readers in a past historical narrative, yes, but associations with 21st century movements such as Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street demonstrate the desire to connect the early 20th century with the present. Debs the socialist fueled a movement, and

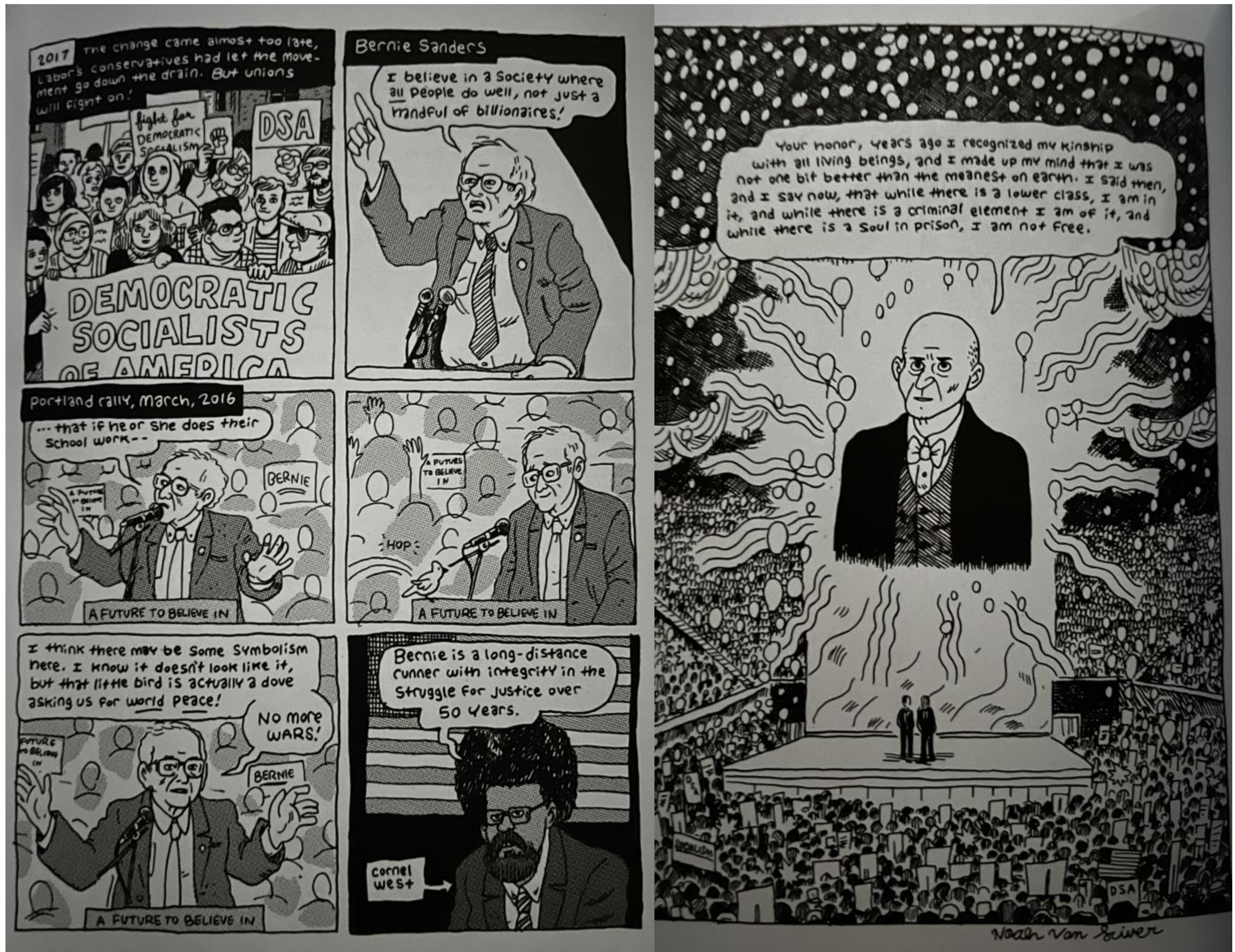

Figure One and Figure Two: The final two pages of the graphic novel frame Senator Bernie Sanders as the next American socialist leader, specifically as an inheritor of Debs' previous work in the early 20th century. In figure one, Sanders' image follows a drawing of diverse Democratic socialists marching for worker's rights; a famous moment from a 2016 campaign speech by Sanders is depicted next. Dr. Cornel West then states that Sanders is invested in "the struggle for justice." These images all proceed figure two, which displays a large campaign rally gathered to celebrate Debs. Here, Debs famously states his alignment with all people in his fight for freedom: "... while there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free" (Van Sciver 127-128).

his political message of socialism "had quite a good name in this country despite all the obstacles put in its way" during his lifetime (Zinn, "The State" 251).[1] Yet, Debs' goals of equity and kinship are not yet realized despite the passage of time; with his political goals

incomplete, his narrative remains instead to inspire those from a new century, as emphasized by the appearances of Senator Sanders and Dr. Cornel West as the inheritors of Debs' legacy in the graphic novel's final pages.

During the first decade of the 21st century, post-9/11 sentiments created the perception of an environment for American political unity; there was hope for a better future because the nation had found a reason to conceive of itself as linked by mourning and despair. But cracks in a national identity became prominent once again during the 2010s with the rise of partisan groups such as the Tea Party Movement, Occupy Wall Street, and Black Lives Matter (Kruse and Zelizer 2). An unequal distribution of wealth has surged once more in the early 21st century, although now historian Howard Zinn claims the capitalist system has become "even more unbridled, more savage" due to globalism as Americans suffer without social systems such as medical care, adequate housing, and fully funded education ("Can" 1-2). In other words, a sort of second Gilded Age has emerged, one that potentially rivals the original Gilded Age as upward mobility and financial stability seem like distant dreams for American citizenry (Cronin 322).[2] In

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[1] Zinn here refers to the influence of Soviet politics during the 20th century on perceptions of leftism in the United States: "Then the Soviet Union came along, and for a long time it gave socialism a bad name. I do not think what they had in the Soviet Union was socialism, but that is what people associated with socialism. It was not hard, then, to simply denigrate socialism. The media and the culture collaborated in all this, and they distort or forget history" ("The State" 251). This context is valuable to keep in mind, as the perception of leftism in the 21st century is impacted by the preceding international politics of the 20th century.

[2] As an important note, this project focuses on adaptations of leftist authors from the first half of the 20th century. While the Progressive Era follows the Gilded Age and is specifically defined as 1890 to the start of World War I, the "philosophical tentacles [of the period's politics] extend further in both directions" (L. Fisher 5). Therefore, the influence of leftist reform can be seen to extend to a Communist author such as Richard Wright in his novel *Native Son,* the latest published work from the 20th century considered within this project.

response, many political narratives in the United States have returned to an overt, didactic style of writing in order to address social and economic disparity, despite the overall rejection of such literature, according to John Whalen-Bridge, within the academy. With these historical echoes and emerging narrative in mind, I extend the concept of continued legacy presented by works like *Eugene V. Debs: A Graphic Novel* to consider the reemergence of didactic political literature in the United States during the 21st century, in particular through conscious adaptations of early 20th century protest novels for revitalized leftist audiences in the pursuit of previously unmet political desires.

In this project, I therefore examine the resurgence of what I describe as didactic political literature in the 21st century, specifically adaptations of early 20th century leftist works by authors Upton Sinclair, Jack London, and Richard Wright. While the most political aspects of these writers' fiction are often either criticized as too overt – such as Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Wright's *Native Son* – or forgotten in favor of literary merit – London's *The Iron Heel* in comparison to his other works like *Call of the Wild* – I argue that contemporary adaptations of their didactic political works show an effort to accomplish previously unmet political goals, such as the end of inequities due to wage disparity, racism, sexism, and classism. In effect, these contemporary didactic adaptations recognize continued political failures in the United States because the political reforms written about 100 years earlier have not been addressed; they also push for constant adaptation and change in the new century as recognition of the inequalities specific to a 21st century citizenry. As outspoken democracy and justice scholar Harvey Kaye claims, the American left can be "propelled by the memory and legacy of those who came before [contemporary Americans], the yearnings and aspirations [they] feel, and the

responsibility [they] have to those yet to come," but such a movement must also not remain in the realm of "only recovery and reconstruction"; the left must push toward "a freer, more equal, and more Democratic America" beyond what has been previously achieved ("Americans" 18), and the didactic political adaptations studied in this project strive to enact such change via their language, their purposes, and their politics.

Vitally, this adaptive approach to American political literature encourages a rewriting of the left as no longer a "politics of failure" as described by Mark Fisher (78) and rejects claims of the didactic political novel form as obsolete. Marxist historian Mike Davis argues that the fractured American left suffered due to "a chain of historic 'defeats' and blocked possibilities" in his history of leftist engagement and activism through the late 20th century (*Prisoners*). Yet he also recognizes the new possibilities of the contemporary moment as a time for change: "This seems an age of catastrophe, but it's also an age equipped, in an abstract sense, with all the tools it needs. Utopia is available to us" (Goodyear).[3] The adaptations considered in this project revitalize the political and historical narratives from the early 20th century because that particular period has been mythologized as one of both drastic social inequality and overtly radical change, echoes that creators now seek to emulate and even complete despite previous perceptions of failure. Any political narrative must have a reason for its engagement, a desire that it discusses and a change that it potentially represents. Most American leftist narratives – with leftism described in this project as intentionally broad in order to encapsulate a range of political positions in the United States over the last century, most importantly a

[3] Davis does share this potential for hope in a 2020 interview, but he also recognizes the struggle resulting from the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine during later writings (M. Davis, "Thanatos").

desire to see capitalism replaced with a form of Marxism, socialism, or communism (Booker 7) – seek to inspire justice for a perceived marginalized group, based around social disparity in light of race, gender, sexuality and class distinctions. The various incarnations of the American left represented a hope for "economic democracy" during the early 20th century time of Debs, an "equalization of wealth and opposition to corporate power" (Zinn, "The State" 251); political novels from the early 20th century attempted to identify with marginalized populations while also outlining "a concrete course of ameliorative social action" to remediate social concerns (L. Fisher 21, 23). Through representation and outspoken appeals, public perceptions could be changed because control over the official narratives of marginalized peoples was displaced from a singular narrative by the powerful to a diversity of perspectives by didactic writers (25). These writers, such as Sinclair and London, brought "a kind of force into the discussion that mere prose could not match" (Zinn, "Resistance" 65). Such political novels inspired and enhanced social engagement, allowing Americans to "feel that they [were] part of a vibrant movement" (66). But this important work has often been relegated to obscurity or demeaned as lesser literature in the American canon, a consequence in particular when protest novels did not completely meet their stated political goals. I argue that this categorization is overall limiting, and I therefore seek to elevate and interrogate the importance of didactic political literature by American authors, in particular during this resurgence of overtly political creative texts during the 21st century.

A political novel is typically caught between a claim for justice and a claim for personal values (Bromwich 3): a desire to create "literature as a weapon" to speak about a variety of socio-economic limitations (Booker 7) and a hope to see those limitations no

longer exist. Importantly for this project, however, the political novel and the didactic political novel overlap yet do not occupy the same space. American novelists may often write about political topics, such as the invaluable literature by authors Toni Morrison and James Baldwin,[4] but didactic political works call for action and demand specific changes in connection with their creative works – creative works more in line with Walter Rideout's definition of the "radical novel" from the first half of the 20th century which "demonstrates, either explicitly or implicitly, that its author objects to the human suffering imposed by some socioeconomic system and *advocates that the system be fundamentally changed*" (12).[5] This direct call for change is the didactic element of the work, the moral demand for broken systems to no longer be sustained. Such an approach causes didactic political literature to often be viewed as ineffectual and inelegant because, according to Irving Howe, overly didactic works rarely change the minds of readers (*Politics* 22, 92). But this perspective about political engagement, as Zinn argues about political engagement generally and I extend to political narratives specifically, is incredibly limited and near-sighted; a political event is often considered a failure if it has no immediate consequences to influence change over a political situation, even though such a perception ignores the incredible potential toward hope in survival and resistance at a later time. A "superficial view" of political engagement often emphasizes "momentary defeats or defeats that may not be overcome for several years [and] are simply labeled 'defeats' without understanding." In many cases, so-called "defeats lay

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[4] Baldwin's thoughts on political writing will be further detailed in the third chapter of this project, as well as the thoughts of fellow authors Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright.
[5] Rideout includes Sinclair's *The Jungle,* London's *The Iron Heel,* and Wright's *Native Son* all as examples of "radical novels" from the first half of the 20th century.

the groundwork for later victories because of what happens to people in the course of that struggle" (Zinn, "The Backseat" 26).[6] Yet the struggle continues, and the literature's purpose remains. I argue that, as these narratives are extended and revitalized, the literary weapon may just need some adjustments after a perceived defeat – an adaptation, in other words, in light of additional oncoming battles.

In addition to this focus on defeat or failure, didactic literature has been de-emphasized in the literary canon, in particular overtly socialist works by otherwise canonized authors like London. Zinn notes this phenomenon with other writers around the same period such as Mark Twain and Sinclair Lewis, for "as soon as a well-known novelist writes something political, then whatever he wrote is sort of pushed into obscurity" ("Critical" 92).[7] This project rejects such obscurity and instead highlights the overt political intentions of authors, both authors regularly recognized as didactic like Sinclair and Wright as well as authors rarely still recognized in the literary canon as outspoken leftists like London. Although didactic political writing has been reduced to a "sub-literary status" as simply a bad kind of American literature due to its overt political calls to action (Whalen-Bridge 2, 29), such work should not continue to be ignored or diminished within American literary history. In this project, therefore, political fiction generally is recognized for its ability to demonstrate social and governmental changes over time (Cronin 11), and didactic political fiction in particular is framed as a continued

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[6] Zinn specifically discusses the Albany Movement in the 1960s in this interview, but the concept is applicable for leftist political engagement and discussion generally ("The Backseat" 26).

[7] Zinn here discusses Lewis' 1935 dystopian novel *It Can't Happen Here;* although he only references Twain by name, an example from Twain could easily include his anti-imperialism short story "The War Prayer" from the turn of the century.

process of calling for previously unmet political desires, even if those efforts have been obscured or overall reduced to failure alone.

This continued political process, I further argue, is inherently tied to the process of literary adaptation, as a rejection of failure for didactic political works must allow for the space to move forward from a previous narrative as well as the ability to craft updated stories for the 21st century. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot describes, a historical narrative is a "particular bundle of silences" produced through "specific narratives [as] differential exercise[s] of power" (27, 25). Importantly, representations of the past consider "the struggles of our present" (151), so an adaptation can therefore function as a purposeful rewriting of political content to unearth previous silences – an active project exhibited by an adaptation and its particular moralizing content for an intended audience. Hayden White argues that this moralizing process occurs with historical narratives because narrativity relates to "the impulse to moralize reality" and "the establishment of social order" (14, 23). Keeping both moralizing intent and a democratic potential to uncover silences in mind, I argue that adapted didactic narratives in particular can allow for a reconfiguration of assumptions about political actions and writings from an American past, with the potential to rewrite and confront contemporary moral concerns in a newly configured version of a political story about 21st century inequalities.

As previous assumptions are uncovered and potential silences are recognized, national narratives about leftist failure must also be undone so that the potential for present and future advocacy can be met in the United States. In other words, these didactic political adaptations must also address competing and moralizing narratives while contending with a presumed version of an American past. As David W. Blight

argues, a nation often seeks a "master narrative" in order to believe in a common identity, an effort that requires both remembering and forgetting by citizens of that nation (391, 31). For national memory, a cohesive narrative can forge "unifying myths and [make] remembering safe" (9) after periods of struggle and disagreement, such as the example of the American Civil War in his book *Race and Reunion*. Yet, as Blight also notes, a nation contains competing ideologies and narratives within its borders, and such ideologies therefore demand "a segregated historical memory" between different political communities (361).[8] To put it another way, national memory attempts reduction to "a single plot," while different groups within a nation instead contest such a narrative, even as competing narratives from political groups and a nation may share images, events, and figures (Boym 41, 53). Political writings are one method to contest a particular narrative, to address what Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky describe as "manufactured consent" against "marginalized dissent" (2). As a nation, American political narratives can be self-renewing because such narratives consult a recognizable past in order to imagine an aspirational future (Cronin 6).[9] This adaptive potential for the United States is powerful as protest narratives search for a just and inclusive nation. By reaching back

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[8] Blight's *Race and Reunion* considers national memory in connection to the Civil War. However, Blight recognizes the general desire for reunion in the United States, a desire that continues into the 21st century as outlined by Kruse and Zelizer's *Fault Lines.* And while the focus of Blight's project is the goal of reunion, my project considers alternative political desires while taking important guidance from his research on the power of changeable political narratives on a national scale.

[9] Political novels are often used to challenge a perceived national narrative and/or national norm. As one example, Cronin discusses Mark Twain's infamous *Huck Finn* as a painful coming-of-age story "in search of freedom, common sense, and basic morality" in order to "escape the wrongheaded prejudices of our darker past" (3). However, it is also important to remember that historical and political narratives can also be normative and conservative in nature (De Groot 262), just as utopian narratives can be conservative as well (Levitas xiii).

into an "unending multiplicity" of history via fictional representations (De Groot xvi), didactic political novels in the present can adapt and adjust beyond the "single plot" of failure for leftist political literature in order to argue anew for particular political ideals beyond any continuing dominant narratives alone.

Additionally, those excluded from a dominant national narrative can work to displace such presumptions through the production and discussion of didactic political works. As feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins demonstrates, distinctive group histories exist within national memory despite a nation's accepted memory continuing to oppress and control citizens within its borders (250, 247). A nation promotes itself as "a collection of people who have come to believe that they have been shaped by a common past and are destined to share a common future" (247). But distinctive political communities within that nation – in the case of Collins, communities constructed by Black women, and in this case of this project, communities constructed for leftist Americans – may not consistently have the power or the voice to promote their own desires for representation and change.[10] The adapted political novel allows for a testing ground against these dominant narratives, and their didactic elements encourage a moral confrontation with inequalities and injustices.

Within this proposed frame, however, it is important to recognize the difference between a nostalgic engagement with an American past and an active adaptation of that

[10] Collins pairs the ideology of the nation with the power of the nation-state: "[…] despite the U.S. Constitution's state commitment to equality of all American citizens, historically, the differential treatment of U.S. Blacks, women, the working class, and other subordinated groups meant that the United States operated as a nation-state that disproportionately benefited affluent White men" (248). My work addresses political narratives from the subordinated groups outlined by Collins in her analysis, such as the working class and Black Americans.

past for contemporaneous politics. A nostalgic engagement "mourns for the impossibility of mythical return," according to Svetlana Boym, "for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values" (8). While these adaptations may reflect on the radical engagement of the early 20th century as inspirational, their interest is not connected with a mourning for that exact past; even as some possibilities have not been met, other rights have been recognized and extended to a larger population of marginalized Americans. Instead, these political adaptations seek a completion of previous promises, a betterment of that American past for the changeable present as well as any imagined future.[11] Kaye outlines this kind of engagement as twofold: both *how* American narratives are remembered and *what* from those narratives must be retained ("Remember" 53). Leftist engagement must ultimately recognize that "the only way to truly defend, secure, and sustain American democratic life is to progressively enhance it" (54). A focus on nostalgic engagement would hope for a "mythical return" to a previous version of America, while these didactic political works intend to eliminate continued social disparity through direct advocacy. That recognized past is therefore a new beginning – another available opportunity to enhance those rights which have remained incomplete and unequal for over a century in the United States.

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[11] As an interesting note, Michael McGerr agrees that 21st century interest in early 20th century politics is not nostalgic, although I contest his extrapolation from that point toward only "a promise of utopianism" and "the inevitable letdown of unrealistic expectations" (xiv). His analysis focuses on the middle-class progressive movement, which he outlines as distinct from socialism yet more influenced by socialist ideas "than they liked to admit" (xv), while my analysis looks more broadly at leftist politics such as socialism, communism, and Marxism in connection with American literary works.

In order to further outline the goals of this project, I will now consider the 2013 novel *The Accursed* by Joyce Carol Oates. While this novel appears to follow with my overall premise of political adaptation from the early 20th century at first glance, her work actually demonstrates the distinct differences between American fiction that includes the politics of the early 20th century and didactic political adaptations translated for the political concerns of the 21st century. Firstly, Oates' work reflects on the incomplete politics of America's past in order to criticize sexism and racism, but she does not adapt a didactic political message for the 21st century within her novel so that any previously unmet political desires can then be realized by additional action. This distinction overall aligns Oates' political fiction more with the writings of Morrison and Baldwin instead of Sinclair, London, or Wright. And secondly, while Oates does elevate some leftist ideals and writers, such as Sinclair and his indisputable desire for worker reform, she still ultimately leaves these characters in a narrative of political failure, without a clear path toward realizable change due to their efforts. Any didactic political literature is ultimately disrupted, incomplete, or dismissed by her novel's end. These two differences are vital to framing how historical adaptations about the early 20th century, as well as political novels without didactic messaging, differ from the didactic political adaptations considered for this larger project.

To start, Oates' *The Accursed* is a sprawling work of fiction, a novel with characters ranging from a paranoid Woodrow Wilson, a trickster-like Mark Twain, an overtly racist Jack London, a brash Teddy Roosevelt, and an impossibly earnest Upton Sinclair. Oates originally started the novel in 1984 when she taught at Princeton University, but she returned to finish the narrative decades later (Harkness, Truffin 110).

A combination of gothic fiction and historical fiction, this "summary-resistant" story broadly details a terrible curse at Princeton from 1905-1906 (Truffin 111), with a collection of diary entries, letters, historical documents, newspaper accounts, firsthand recollections, religious sermons, and even records of potential hallucinations gathered by "a cartoon of a historian" named M.W. Van Dyck II in the distant 1980s (Harkness). In his review, Stephen King describes the novel as "[swarming] with ambiguities," a version of "E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* set in Dracula's castle."[12] At the center of the text, the granddaughter of a wealthy and esteemed Presbyterian minister named Annabel Slade disappears from her own wedding under very mysterious circumstances. According to the cursed tale, she is kidnapped by a demon to live in his Bog Kingdom, and she escapes just before giving birth to an unspeakable creature – most likely a snake – and dying in childbirth. Annabel's story is just the start of paranormal activity in the town, all centered around her grandfather's long held secret sin. As more of his grandchildren gruesomely and mysteriously die due to the curse, the religious Winslow Slade is driven to reveal his secret and confess to his congregation, an action that results in the resurrection of his lost family members alongside his own death. Oates' narrative ultimately considers how violence – racial violence, sexual violence, generational violence – shapes different communities, in particular the wealthy elites at the turn of the century. A "coalescence of history, horror, and social satire," the novel examines just how frightening social progress such as women's rights, workers' rights, and racial equality must have been for the wealthy white class during a time of such historic change (Charles). To this end, *The*

[12] For additional discussion on Doctorow and *Ragtime* in particular, please refer to the first chapter of this project.

Accursed reveals the true monsters as those with the power to perpetuate "racial violence, class warfare, religious prejudice, and misogyny," a dark reflection on the need to reject that version of America's past in order to move forward toward a more progressive and more accepting future (Harkness).

At first glance, this novel appears to engage in several leftist narratives, with the inclusion of outspoken leftist novelists such as Sinclair and London as an important element. Yet reflection on previous failures and direct calls for action in an explicitly didactic work are distinctly different types of political fiction, as previously outlined in this introduction. As one review for *The Accursed* states, "[the novel] demands we think – with monsters – about our failures to face the darkest truths about ourselves and the choices we've made" (Harkness). The curse is meant to expose a nightmarish yet real society of wealth and corruption, one disquieted by marginalized peoples and their demands for a socially progressive society (Truffin 115, 118). As a smaller example of this exposure, readers are supposed to be disgusted by future President Wilson's inability to repudiate lynchings in the American South. This disgust is especially potent because Wilson is confronted by a Black man passing as white at Princeton who reveals his heritage in order to emphasize the moral shortcomings of Wilson and his ilk: "The horror of lynchings is that *no one stops it;* among influential Christians like yourself [in reference to Wilson], *no one speaks against it*" (Oates 15, emphasis original). On a larger scale in connection with the curse, Winslow Slade's eventual confession to the murder of a young Black woman by strangulation, shouted as a sermon to his fellow Christians, unveils the hypocrisy of those in power and their horrible truths often unspoken. "KNOW THAT MY SIN HAS BEEN THE MORE COMPOUNDED IN THAT I HAVE WORN

THROUGH MY LIFE *THE FACE OF VIRTUE,*" Slade screams in the epilogue. "KNOW THAT MY EVIL HAS BEEN THE MORE COMPOUNDED IN THAT I HAVE SPOKEN THROUGH MY LIFE IN *THE VOICE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS*" (649-50, emphasis original). Another man was executed for the minister's crime, but Slade was allowed to remain free and unquestioned due to his privilege and status as a wealthy white man (657). These inequalities and more are revealed throughout Oates' fictional account, and that political commentary is crucial to her intentions. As Morrison details about political writing in her essay "The Writer Before the Page," the reader should be moved to a "nonliterary experience of the text," to understand a previously discredited or unacknowledged narrative in order to appreciate what can be useful from a past and what must be discarded (264, 267). Writers remember, according to Morrison, and that memory provides a responsibility to create and "improve his/her own time" (270). Yet even as Oates' reflects Morrison's intentions, her work does not fit the objectives of didactic political literature for this project. Because the overall point for *The Accursed* remains the shortcomings of that American past and its continued legacy, the need to reject in order to flourish, the novel does not focus on a specific, direct action adaptable and possible in the contemporaneous present. Oates confronts this version of America's past in order to demand a kind of reflection. This reflection, however, primarily seeks recognition and rejection of dangerous inequalities without a direct and clear political goal as the didactic writings of Sinclair and London had outlined during the early 20th century. Such difference between political writings and didactic political writings demonstrates overlapping yet distinctly different approaches. In effect, Oates' novel

could easily consider how the potential impacts of such reflections and revelations translate into direct actions, but the text does not do so.

The novel could also detail a rendering of leftist politics as no longer based in failure, but the leftist figures and leftist political actions remain based in narratives of ineffectiveness. This recognition, again, is not a criticism of Oates' novel but an important note to understand the differences between the didactic political adaptations considered in this project and the historical adaptations with political storylines represented by *The Accursed*. Josiah Slade, for instance, is a fictional young man seeking to renounce the horrors attached to his family's wealth and elite status. Grandson to the sinner Winslow Slade and brother to the kidnapped Annabel Slade, Josiah rejects his status as heir to a fortune built from banking, manufacturing, and slave labor in order to develop "a new, more ethical consciousness" by the end of the novel (Truffin 111-112). Over the course of his journey, Josiah shifts toward the possibilities of socialism due to his interest in London's novels and his eventual connections with Sinclair. Once he and his sister are both resurrected at the novel's end, a result of their grandfather's confession, he officially repudiates his racial and class privileges, marries a "scandalously independent woman," and joins Sinclair's socialist commune Helicon Home Colony sixty miles away from Princeton University (112). This actual utopian colony was publicly viewed as an odd experiment by the general public, with its end in an accidental fire making it difficult to judge the attempt as either a success or a failure (Arthur 101, 105).[13]

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[13] As additional context for the commune, the historical group decided not to allow Black Americans to join, which is a significant change from Oates' novel version: "that [racism] was consistent with the surprising blind spot of many progressives of the time. Their feeling, rarely voiced, seems to have been that when [B]lack people had been brought up to the necessary level of culture, they would be welcome" (Arthur 87). This

At first glance, this final entry from the fictional historian Van Dyck is joyous for the young Slades and their resolutions. Josiah and his sister Annabel – now married to the same Black man who confronted Wilson about the horrors of lynchings – are free from their family's curse, and they can flourish in a leftist community built as a radical repudiation of exclusionary American politics. He has become "the student who escapes the curse of institutional schooling and breaks its cycle of terror" (122). This possible reading is hopeful, yet it is not complete or fully contextualized. The historian decides to cut his story short at the existence of Sinclair's actual commune and its fiery end, and only reassures readers of the siblings' survival. The socialist commune and its potential are abandoned by his narrative once he mentioned its eventual downfall offhandedly:

> Of what lies ahead for idealistic young people in March 1907, this historian will not speak except to say that all survived the arson-set fire; for my chronicle has ended, and 'ordinary life' must resume. My final scene is the double wedding ceremony at the Helicon Home Colony in a flower-garlanded setting, with Upton Sinclair boyishly smiling, shaking hands with the bridal couples and the guests, tears shining in his eyes: 'Comrades! It is the dawn of a new day! *Revolution now!*" (Oates 647-8, emphasis original)

The image of Sinclair boyishly grinning at imminent revolution seems to imply a buoyant ending, but his successes have already been undone by the historian's previous lines. The commune does not survive, as both actual historical accounts as well as the fictional novel detail, and Sinclair's socialist experiment ends in a failure. A footnote from Van Dyck hints at the "disruptions to tradition [that might be] ahead in the tumultuous twentieth century, let alone the unfathomable twenty-first" (648), but this general

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change was most likely done in *The Accursed* in order to emphasize the reflection aspect considered in this analysis of the novel as a political novel, as well as to further delineate the overtly racist London's characterization from her egalitarian version of Sinclair.

acknowledgement still aligns more with Morrison's concept of political literature than the didacticism examined for this project. Slade and Sinclair both exist within a constantly striving, constantly failing cycle here without needed adaptation for a new political engagement.

To focus on adapted representations of leftist authors more specifically, their moral failures and personal failings are also a significant element of their characterizations in *The Accursed.* Oates' account might elevate their leftist politics over the likes of American presidents Wilson and Roosevelt, but their political limitations and moral deficiencies remain a primary focus. Such writing again matches more with the reflection aspect in order to recognize what to discard from America's past than any didactic approach for 21st century advocacy. Sinclair, overall, is presented as a passionate yet ineffective author of protest literature, a man driven to destructive tendencies with his health and his marriage due to his adherence toward socialist ideals (Truffin 121). A young Sinclair lives near Princeton in a "ramshackle cottage" with his family as he writes his next great novel, but he suffers under fears of constant failure and uncertainty (Oates 141, 143). He wonders at his faltering courage to confront child labor, wage slavery, and racism; he also assumes that a socialist revolution will arrive at the imminent, "probable date" of 1910 (143, 149). As he plans for his imagined future, he projects that he will be known as a revolutionary hero for eventual arrests and overall martyrdom toward his causes: "[…] for the hopeful young author had no doubt that books might change the world; his model was Charles Dickens, as well as America's great author Harriet Beecher Stowe whose *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was popularly credited with having precipitated the Civil War! And so why should it not be Upton Sinclair who should take his place among

the great authors of Western civilization?" (152-3). Yet again and again, Sinclair is met with defeat in *The Accursed.* He speaks with political leaders and socialist advocates full of hope for success toward his efforts, only to be left just like the commune previously mentioned in a state of despair (634-9). Even as the novel recognizes Sinclair's unending attempts toward leftist reform, it never fails to match each attempt with a reminder of his inadequacies. His character – and his status as a leftist representative in the novel – cannot seem to escape a politics of failure at each turn.

One of Sinclair's lowest moments actually coincides with his desire to meet another leftist American author, Jack London. Oates' version of London portrays as many negative associations with the author as possible in order to then discard those same associations via political reflection. London is drunk, racist, narcissistic, accusatory, and abrasive in his short meeting with Sinclair for a socialist rally. His socialism is "compromised by fantasies of racial superiority" (Truffin 121), a reality that devastates the desolate Sinclair who previously viewed London as the ideal leftist author and his "hero" (Oates 500). "Where had the Boy Socialist gone?" Sinclair wonders after he experiences London's brutishness and disengagement with the cause (515). "And how uncanny," Josiah Slade reflects after meeting the socialist author in person, "to discover how very different Jack London was from his photographs. Far coarser, and more slovenly in dress – and his intellect crude as a meat cleaver. Josiah thought *He is, yet can't possibly be, 'Jack London' – the author. He is a buffoon imposter, yet another demon*" extension of his family's curse (520, emphasis original). The actual London did not believe in racial equality, a direct contradiction to his otherwise socialist belief system (Raskin 35, Reesman 7). This reality is a direct failing of his leftist perspectives,

and Oates' reflection on this moral deficiency is clearly worth recognizing and uncovering in the 21st century. But his moral failings are yet another failure for leftist engagement, especially because London's characterization is framed specifically as a disappointment for the radical Sinclair and the newly radicalized Josiah. These fictionalized historical figures, placed back in their original time period, cannot realistically "be portrayed without irony" in some fashion, even as they are the preferable alternative to the corrupt Princeton elite (Truffin 121). Their purposes become tied to a refutation of racism, sexism, classism, and hypocrisy; yet their narratives cannot escape limitations outside of the curse's demand for personal atonement by Winslow Slade. Any didactic messaging, even within summaries from original novels by Sinclair and London such as *The Jungle* or *The Sea Wolf,* remains firmly in an American past unaltered by present political advocacy claims. The politics are historicized, and the messaging as a result remains unchanged.

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And so, while *The Accursed* engages with early 20th century leftist politics as well as protest writers, it does not adapt those politics or narratives for the 21st century with revitalized advocacy claims. The works examined in this project do so. With these distinctions in mind, this project considers three examples of 21st century didactic political adaptations with their basis in the leftist politics of the early 20th century. The first chapter considers the overall legacy of Upton Sinclair and his commitment to direct advocacy via literature throughout his life within the satiric novel *U.S.!* by Chris Bachelder. The second chapter interrogates the direct adaptation of Jack London's socialist novel *The Iron Heel* as a 2016 play by Edward Einhorn. The third chapter

recognizes the varied legacy of Richard Wright's *Native Son* and its storied adaptations, with particular focus on the 2019 film by director Rashid Johnson and screenwriter Suzan-Lori Parks. These chapters interrogate the importance for 21st century adaptations to adjust for contemporaneous political concerns, the malleable possibilities of an American past to inform the politics of the country's present as well as any potential futures, and the power of simultaneous meanings within didactic political adaptations in order to reach contemporaneous audiences.

In "Adapting Literary Rebels: Upton Sinclair, E.L. Doctorow, and Chris Bachelder's *U.S.!"* I reject the premise of the fading leftist political novel in American literature, with particular focus on the potential for revitalized didactic adaptations of early 20th century writings in the 21st century. Although the novel satirizes a fictionalized, zombie-like Sinclair weighed down by the constant failures of leftist politics, I argue that adaptation for the 21st century is the key instead of an undead resurrection of exact early 20th century concepts. A focus on present justice claims eliminates a continued narrative of leftist failure, emphasizes the potential for contemporary rewritings, and accepts didacticism once again within American literary works. A truly radical approach to literature can emerge 100 years later because adaptation requires parallel political engagements alongside valuable narrative changes.

"Unseized Past, Inspirational Future: The Political Possibilities of Adapting Jack London's *The Iron Heel*" examines the importance of unrealized political actions still recoverable and achievable in the present. By considering the power of an undecided, adaptable narrative about an American past, didactic literature can imagine previously missed possibilities. London's *The Iron Heel* projected a distant utopian future as

inspiration for his early 20th century socialist readers, a narrative about the dangers of the coming political struggles with rewards for subsequent generations; Einhorn's play situates itself between an inspirational past and an idealistic future so that the unseized potential of an American past can become redemption for previously incomplete political actions. The political narrative transforms from previous failure in an accepted past to feasible redemption in an influential present. The didactic literature is therefore adjusted for the realities of its present moment.

Finally, "Engaging with the Past: Simultaneity and the Many Stories Within Director Rashid Johnson's *Native Son*" completes the rejection of didactic American literature as failed or inferior by offering an alternative approach: a conversation centered around simultaneity, the idea that literary works are interrelated, and audiences engage with literature as multiple narratives at once. *Native Son* as a didactic political novel has suffered claims of failure since its publication, and its adaptations have consequently followed suit. Through the lens of simultaneity, I argue that a transformed and imperfect narrative such as *Native Son* can once again engage in a constant conversation about structural racism and classism in the United States through its evolving politics and representations.

These chapters outline the importance of a revitalized approach to didactic political literature in the United States, as well as an altered approach to political adaptations. In his rousing call for a radical American present, Kaye reminds his readers that the previous generations of radical leftists struggled for a representative America "despite their own terrible faults and failings" ("Remember" 54). He also cites Max Lerner's 1939 book *It Is Later Than You Think: The Need for a Militant Democracy* as

support for his claim to reassert a leftist political embrace: "To me the most important development in the radical movement […] lies in its rediscovery of the past… We have looked back at history, and we have found a usable past – and one that we can call ours. And such a discovery of the past, if it is sincere and deeply experienced, may set us on our own path to the future" (78-9). If I may adapt these ideas from both the early 20th century and the 21st century, I believe that the return of didactic political literature in the United States is just such engagement with a "usable past," faults and failings included as a new beginning.

CHAPTER ONE

ADAPTING OUTDATED LITERARY REBELS:

UPTON SINCLAIR, E.L. DOCTOROW, AND CHRIS BACHELDER'S *U.S.!*

In a short section of his 2006 satirical political novel *U.S.!,* a book meant to interrogate the status of the leftist political novel in the United States at the start of the 21st century, Chris Bachelder introduces a comparison between two distinct fiction writers – both famous for their works about leftist political concerns yet disparate in their approaches to such narratives. He does so by having the writers, Upton Sinclair and E.L. Doctorow, dine together in a nondescript 21st century Chinese restaurant, with a subdued Doctorow only reluctantly accepting the invitation from an excitable Sinclair (109).[14] Sinclair advocates for direct, didactic writing about leftist political action, while Doctorow distinctly dislikes this type of literature.

The actual Sinclair was an outspoken political novelist and self-described socialist propagandist during the first half of the 20th century, a man who embraced his role as a forthright agitator as a method to further contemporaneous political change in the United States (Cronin 77); in contrast, the actual Doctorow was often labeled as the last great American political novelist during the late 20th century until his death in 2015 partly because he did not engage in such a didactic approach, a writer principally concerned with America's radical past and its political traditions in his novels rather than the country's current political actions (Wutz and Murphet 1). Sinclair's writing was most

[14] As later discussed in the chapter, this approach is similar to Doctorow's rewritings of famous figures from the early 20th century, such as Booker T. Washington, J.P. Morgan, and Henry Ford in his novel *Ragtime*.

often viewed as a failure, both during his lifetime and afterward, because his didactic style did not inspire desired political changes, a style that Doctorow himself directly rejected as a "kind of death" for literary works ("The Beliefs" 107).[15] In order to represent these differences, Bachelder's fictional versions are presented in contradistinction of purpose and process, even as both characters recognize the decline of the didactic political novel in American literature throughout the previous century. Bachelder intends to "resurrect" this discussion of purpose and justice via literature ("Resurrecting"), even as his novel portrays Sinclair as a man out of his time as well as literally dead in the eyes of his fellow Americans.

Bachelder's version of Sinclair, a deceased man somehow alive again due to his vaguely-described resurrection ability, has become increasingly irrelevant and even despised in American politics over the last century; yet he doggedly remains dedicated to his socialist principles even as the country rejects his continued political writings – to the point of repeated assassinations during the late 20th century as an outspoken method to reject his radical ideals.[16] This Sinclair remains limited by his decaying body and inability to engage with 21st century politics in the same fashion as his previous works.

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[15] These distinct differences are explored in more detail during later sections of this chapter, in particular Doctorow's perspective on writing and politics with literary works.

[16] Sinclair's assassinations – and likewise the assassins themselves – are a point of fascination for the American public within the novel's narrative. For example, *U.S.!* includes a podcast transcript about the "Men Who Have Killed Upton Sinclair" (Bachelder 147); the discussed men are often celebrated by American journalists in their writings, and the Sinclair assassin role is recognized as "professionalized" and a competition for those against socialism (150, 229). During the final section of the novel, two "Sinclair assassins" are hired to kill the novelist, with one "working for the GOP again" and the other working "for the other guys [implied as the Democratic Party]" because "the old guy [Sinclair] is making them look bad" (256). These scenes imply that Sinclair is rejected by the general American public, as well as both major political parties in the novel's version of a contemporaneous United States.

Doctorow, on the other hand, is fairly well-regarded within this fictional interpretation of the United States, a knowledgeable leftist voice sought out by the contemporaneous press for quotations as a respectable contrast to the undead Sinclair in particular (105). Critically, however, his historical writings do not engage with the present as Sinclair's literature did over 100 years ago. In Bachelder's novel, the two men's dinner conversation revolves around the production of American political literature, a microcosm of the debate between a didactic political approach to novels and a more distanced, literary one. In effect, Bachelder rewrites this long-standing critical debate within his novel via a discussion between adapted versions of famous literary figures from the 20th century – an explicitly political narrative about the history of American political novels.[17] Their representations therefore stand as a potential case study about the continued purpose of political American literature in the 21st century, especially in

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[17] The idea of a national political narrative is complicated in the 21st century, although such a distinction does still have weight in discussions of the political novel. For example, Caren Irr claims that the resurgent political novel exists "as a means for imagining the social forces that may arise from a new phase in the restless capitalist quest for profit" ("Postmodernism" 536), and I agree with this sentiment for political adaptations rewriting concerns from the early 20th century. However, I disagree with Irr's stance that 21st century political novels all seek to move beyond national narratives toward the geo-political (*Toward* 3-4). Because Irr limits national political narratives to "look inward to confirm fidelity to received national ideologies" when compared to global works (9), she appears to ignore both the intent for political novels to question social and governmental apparatuses, as well as the variety of historical perspectives available via nationally focused political adaptations. I agree with Benedict Anderson's claim that the end of nationalism is often predicted and yet never fully realized because, as he argues, the nation retains "emotional legitimacy" and "deep attachments" for its citizens (3-4). In defining the nation as a political community imagined as inherently limited yet dominant, Anderson claims that a nation such as the United States retains communal ties because, "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (6-7). My project therefore recognizes the power of transnational and geo-political approaches to the political novel while primarily focusing on the national political narrative in the United States and its continued presence as a political influence in the 21st century.

connection to the perception of failure surrounding the didactic approach used by Sinclair over 100 years earlier.

The pairing illuminates this disparity well, especially because the characters share a general overlap in interests but not a shared intention during their short discussion. Although Bachelder's fictionalized authors start a friendship at the restaurant, they do not agree about the political novel's continued purpose in a similar fashion to their actual counterparts. Doctorow, although "astonished" by Sinclair's "Fordian productivity," describes Sinclair's work overall as terrible because he instead believes in "narrative distance" from political actions (86-7, 103). The literature itself is the focus for this fictional Doctorow, not a political message intended to invoke specific social change. Conversely, Sinclair compliments Doctorow's beautiful writing about American radicals in early 20th century politics through descriptions of the country as "a history of suffering, oppression, and accident" even as the socialist renounces his new friend's unwillingness to confront contemporary injustices (106) – in this case the injustices of 21st century America. Sinclair eschews Doctorow's "madman's history" (107) as he also despairs at his constant deaths and resurrections without any sign of significant political change: "This is what I come back to. I die and I return to this idea. The World Trade Center is gone and so is the truth and so is history. And so is the Left" (108). The undead Sinclair's newest works continue to speak to prevailing abuses in the country as he views them, writing novels about inadequate working conditions and greedy pharmaceutical companies. This Sinclair demands political action and makes outright political claims within his literary works. But this Doctorow instead abstains from a contemporaneous

focus in favor of an American past (108), using the context of historical narrative as support for his literary interpretations without including direct calls for political action.

Yet both Sinclair and Doctorow as fictional representations are limited in their perspectives on American political works, primarily because the actual authors both are portrayed by Bachelder as part of a national, politicized past themselves. Bachelder's novel *U.S.!* adapts Sinclair as a discussion of the disappearing political novel and the accepted narrative about such works' failures, yet the particular pairing of an undead Sinclair and a naturally-living (and at the time of publication still-living) Doctorow in the section "Professional Messiah" emphasizes the varied critical and creative approaches to political literature in the United States during the last century. In light of their differences within the novel, the adaptations of both Sinclair and Doctorow exemplify disparate ideas about the American political novel as a genre, but neither engender any imagined capacity beyond a fading status for such literary works. Even if both characters appear to desire some sort of change, their portrayals do not stimulate situations within which to produce any impact in the 21st century. They talk in a Chinese restaurant, but nothing comes from these discussions beyond a personal friendship. Therefore, these rewritten novelists instigate a conversation but do not actively create radical content for the new millennium. In this way, the political novel – one steeped in recognition of underrepresented Americans – is realized within the structure of *U.S.!* as part of that failed, radical American past as well, a historical remnant but not a present reality.[18]

[18] As detailed in this project's second chapter on *The Iron Heel,* the American protest novel, and consequently American utopian narratives, is generally perceived as less influential in the 21st century, in particular as a literary form. Utopian themes persist, but purely utopian fiction is less common overall. Fredric Jameson argues that, although utopian thinking and writing has been associated with overly simplistic approaches to

Even within this narrative, however, the novel inadvertently illustrates how a national, politicized history, as well as American protest literature overall, can be adapted just as the authors themselves are. Doctorow is introduced as a fictional character in *U.S.!* because he is a praised political novelist, one who writes about the early 20th century as America's past with a recognizable focus on a radical leftist history. This approach is a distinct contrast to Sinclair's overt and didactic political works from the actual early 20th century. But these two men, with their disparate approaches to the political novel, need not remain in conflict, despite what the rewritten versions within *U.S.!* appear to imply. In a 2004 article about political writing titled "A Soldier Upon a Hard Campaign," Bachelder considers both Sinclair and Doctorow as political authors, with a clear preference for Doctorow and a heavy sort of despondency at the state of political writing in the United States.[19] He accepts that "Americans [have been] shy about mixing their art with politics," a premise strengthened over the 20th century: "We've turned inward: into the suburbs, into the house, into the mind. The canvas has gotten small. […] by and large it seems that we have done little to expand and develop this [political novel] tradition." This tradition is presented by Bachelder, both in this article and his novel, as a split between Sinclair and Doctorow. The article in particular frames Sinclair as a writer intent

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socialism as an alternative to capitalism since Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (*Archaeologies* xii, 20), utopian narratives have transitioned to science-fiction because such works encounter the future without a "punctal ending" (101, 283). Contemporary narratives, he notes, are more focused on future consequences, such as pollution and overpopulation, and the very real consequences that result from such decisions ("Introduction" 364).

[19] Bachelder asserts his personal preference for Doctorow quite clearly in the article: "We still of course have a few straight-up political writers (Doctorow being the absolute best, in my opinion, because, among other things, he knows the history and discourse and contributions of the radical Left, as opposed to the liberal Left" ("A Soldier").

on engaging with the world in perhaps a “crude” and “oversimplistic” way, a man easy to “scoff” at as an overexcited yet ultimately ineffectual author; Doctorow, meanwhile, is upheld as a gifted writer who carries the failure of the political novel, and the dissolution of an American left, on his shoulders. Committed writing, as Doctorow claims and Bachelder echoes, can be a risk without recognizable political benefit:

> The great thing about Doctorow is that he is fully aware of the dangers of committed writing (“There is a kind of death that creeps into your prose when you’re trying to illustrate a principle, no matter how worthy.”)[20] and yet he bemoans the fact that many American writers have turned their backs on the world and focused their attention on what happens in the bedroom and the kitchen. […] So then the question becomes well *how* do you do this – make fully engaged art, that is – without being sentimental, didactic, smug, glib, moralistic, naïve, or seemingly ignorant of the wonderful/awful ambiguities of human life on Earth? That’s a question like how do you create a just and decent society. It’s a bastard, but it’s too important not to think about.

As heavily implied by this frame, Sinclair’s writing carries a supposed death in it because it is sentimental and didactic, and Bachelder’s adapted Sinclair literalizes this death with his missing fingers and exhumed body. Sinclair is dead and unwanted by the American public, while Doctorow is resigned to the political novel’s present state. And so, as this potent question about literature and politics develops in the first decade of the 21st century, *U.S.!* serves as a case study about the tipping point for American political fiction, its most famous authors and its most compelling narratives – just before the return of didactic political novels via adaptation that emerge in the 2010s as a resurgence of early 20th century political concerns. Bachelder’s novel exemplifies this desire to create fully engaged art, to engender a just and decent society, while also struggling against the burden of political commentary in American fiction. Yet while *U.S.!*

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[20] Bachelder takes this quotation from Doctorow’s “The Writer as Independent Witness” interview, which is cited and further discussed later in this chapter.

continues to despair didactic writers such as Sinclair, it also demonstrates the opening for such work to arrive in the American consciousness once again.

By adapting both Sinclair and Doctorow, Bachelder sets the stage for a significant discussion about adaptations of American political texts in the 2010s. *U.S.!* presents a politicized version of America's past as no longer cogent in the 21st century in order to instigate a conversation about the fading political novel in American literature. More interestingly in regard to this project, however, the characters of Sinclair and Doctorow represent the limitations of overt politics within American novels for disparate reasons, even as *U.S.!* is intended to incite such discussion. But then how can a path forward for the American political novel be found? Sinclair represents didactic political novels from the early 20th century, and Doctorow depicts a historically adaptive approach with a literary focus in the late 20th century; by bringing these approaches to political literature together, Bachelder's satirical writing in *U.S.!* actually demonstrates the power of combining an overt political message within historical adaptation via the adaptation of didactic political novels for the 21st century.

In other words, *U.S!* is meant as a satirical discussion of the constantly failing leftist political novel, but it also demonstrates *how* rewritten 21st century narratives can adapt didactic political narratives in order to advocate for contemporaneous concerns. *U.S.!* therefore portrays not only a diminished reckoning with social justice in the first decade of the 21st century within American literature, an intentional conversation as Bachelder asserts; importantly, the novel also exposes a growing need for adapting past didactic narratives for present justice claims as well, a trend that continues to develop during the 2010s. The didactic political novel in the 21st century can revisit the past to see

the previous failures while not remaining focused on those failures as static. Mark Fisher claims this failure as a position of historically "defeated marginality" unable to entreat any discussions of a future: "what needs to be left behind is a certain romantic attachment to the politics of failure" (78). Instead of remaining attached to this narrative of failure, adaptations of previous political works can engage the potential changes for a desired future. By adapting didactic political content, these texts can retain previously potent narratives about American politics while *not only resurrecting but actively rewriting* their narratives for a 21st century American audience with 21st century political concerns. A resurrected Sinclair is limited because he has died with his own ideas about how to write political literature. He has not adapted to the present; he is simply exhumed from the ground, a decaying man from a previous time. Likewise, Doctorow adapts the past yet does not consider didacticism acceptable within literary works. But a truly radical approach such as adaptation can allow for Sinclair-like literary intentions and didactic writing to become prominent once again – not just a resurrection but a rebirth as adaptation for the concerns of the contemporaneous United States.

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To be clear, *U.S.!* itself does not engage with a broad American audience to address contemporaneous political needs, nor does it present a message obvious to those unfamiliar with the works Bachelder adapts. It instead assumes recognition of American literary and political history in order to acknowledge the presumed absurdity of any attempt at political writing for a 21st century satirist or political author. This approach is distinct from many adaptations that do not require any previous knowledge of original content, such as Paul Thomas Anderson's film *There Will Be Blood,* an adaptation of

Sinclair's novel *Oil!* (1927) released a year after *U.S.!*. As mentioned, the novel's satire is based in an understanding of the didactic political novel throughout the 20th century, as well as criticism of the American political novel overall. Bachelder's Sinclair, "the oft-resurrected and oft-assassinated leftist," is not considered a celebrated author by the novel's interpretation of the American public as much as an inelegant propagandist unable to create the social change he so desperately seeks (*U.S.!,* 13). In an interview, Bachelder recognizes the late Sinclair as a "revolutionary spirit that can't quite be stamped out or assassinated" in the American imagination, despite his overwhelmingly blunt approach to political messaging in fiction. Bachelder's novel intends to "resurrect" a discussion about the American political novel and its changed status during the 20th century, with Sinclair as the figurehead of explicit political argumentation: "I wanted to resurrect not only Upton, but I wanted to resurrect if not the political novel, then at least a sort of discussion about the political novel in trying to resurrect not only Sinclair, but discussions of justice, [… and] how an artist can engage with the world" ("Resurrecting").

While an interest in changing ideas about politics is present through the character of Sinclair and his despair at an ineffectual social impact, Bachelder's perspective recognizes the assassination and serial resurrection of Sinclair as emblematic of "the death of the political novel," a topic that he remains "ambivalent about how to engage […] artistically." With this perspective, Bachelder again echoes Doctorow and his stance on "the death of the novel." More broadly, Doctorow may desire to write novels similar to a film experience for America's working-class population, novels that are accessible to all readers (Doctorow, "Novelist" 4); however, he also recognizes that novels cannot

retain the same cultural status achievable in the early 20th century: "The novel used to be a primary act of culture, and I think that in the last twenty or thirty years people have come not to believe in novels any more – at least not in any massive way. So if you're a writer of fiction, you've got to contend with that" ("Mr. Ragtime" 10). Bachelder's conscious contention is situated, from his perspective, at a time when satire specifically is "increasingly untenable" because culture itself has become too absurd to showcase any "underlying lunacy, inequality, or inhumanity" ("A Soldier"). This perception parallels David Foster Wallace's claims about postmodern writing and ironic writing in the 21st century, with Wallace detailing the shift in art's purpose from "a creative instantiation of real values" to "a creative rejection of bogus values" (59, 65).[21] *U.S.!* functions so well as a case study for American political writing, in effect, because Bachelder seems so uncertain about a path for the political novel in the 21st century while also strongly believing in *some kind* of social discussion via literature. The novel deliberates political novels and possible engagement – just prior to a resurgence of didacticism in political adaptations during the 2010s, as this project will show in later chapters.

While *U.S.!* includes references to authors such as John Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, Jack London, and Richard Wright – alongside numerous discussions of Sinclair's own writings – in order to underscore Sinclair's continued attachment to the early 20th century's version of the political novel, no context is given within the novel for general

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[21] As further detail toward this point, David Foster Wallace discusses the transition of American popular culture to television, although he does not view this shift as a change in taste for Americans but instead a change in medium (36). The death of the novel, therefore, is a shift in presentation style for Wallace more than a shift in expectations for American audiences.

reception to such content beyond approval for Doctorow.[22] The novel's intended audience is already presumed aware of content such as Sinclair's questionable literary status, Doctorow's perceived superiority as an author, and even Dos Passos' "Camera Eye" sections in his *U.S.A* trilogy, a writing technique briefly recreated for one section of *U.S.!* about lost childhood innocence. Bachelder's novel does nothing to reject these particular assumptions but instead uses perceived audience knowledge for further effect. Therefore, *U.S.!* is not written for a general American audience but instead one steeped in literary criticism. And the novel plays into the presumptions of literary criticism about the political novel by elevating more literary writers such as Doctorow and Dos Passos over didactic writers such as Sinclair in order to demonstrate its commentary on the current status of the American political novel as well as any flaws of "committed writing."

Throughout American history, the political novel has had broad definitions and varied expectations, with critical interpretations of such work ranging from blunt propaganda to subtle expression. Yet consistently, as John Whalen-Bridge notes, political fiction is often viewed as lesser in the United States, with a particular disregard for novels "*about* politics over those who have combined politics with literary purpose" (183, emphasis original). While novelists during the late 19th – early 20th century such as Sinclair may have sought to expose the failures of corrupt governments, a social loss of

[22] To be clear, only Sinclair exists in the storyworld of *U.S.!* as a resurrected author from the early 20th century. Other authors – with the exception of the previously discussed Doctorow as a still naturally living author – are referenced only by their works or rewritings of their styles, such as a reading list on Sinclair's ENGLISH 684: Advanced Fiction Writing Course (or, Literature as a Class Weapon) (67-9). Further discussion of Sinclair's relationships with other authors are considered in the introduction section on Joyce Carol Oates' *The Accursed* (2013), in particular his activist work in conjunction with then-socialist Jack London.

innocence, and altering national norms (Howe, *Politics* 161; Levitas 74-5; Hutchison xii), politics at large – and novels engaged in political discussions as a result – were largely viewed by critics as "vulgar and amoral" after the Civil War (Howe, *Politics* 162). This perception of vulgarity often led the political novel to be viewed as a lesser form of literature by critics in the United States, with overt political messages during the 20th century considered particularly crass, unwelcome, and ineffectual from a literary perspective. However, this vulgarity was rejected more by literary scholars than readers, as many political novels, demonstrated by wildly successful works such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward,* were some of the most popular and most purchased in the United States during the late 19th century.[23] The popularity of such writing extended into the early 20th century with journalistic writers such as Theodore Dreiser, London, and Sinclair, a point that Bachelder himself recognizes in his depiction of Sinclair for the 21st century because, as he states, the general perception of "good literature" has changed in the country over time. This change for Bachelder is exemplified in public reception for Sinclair's most prominent novel *The Jungle* (1906): "[…] in the hundred years since *The Jungle* came out, we've just, I think we have really different ideas of what makes a good novel. […] Because you [see] in 1906 it's celebrated not just by the proletariat, the working class, but by artists and statesmen and politicians. And so, it was a good novel. It was

[23] The most popular books in 19th century America, as Hugh McIntosh details in *Guilty Pleasures: Popular Novels and American Audiences in the Long Nineteenth Century,* were entrenched in social discussion: "*Uncle Tom's Cabin, A Tale of Two Cities, Ben-Hur,* Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), and *Trilby* each met the reader with a clear purpose, whether this be promoting abolition, critiquing capitalism, strengthening religious faith, or cautioning against the excesses of aestheticism" (19).

considered a good novel, but what has happened in a hundred years is interesting" ("Resurrecting").[24] But this explicit political advocacy faded throughout the 20th century, a viewpoint following critical impressions about literary works, and previously popular novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Jungle* lost literary influence beyond prevalence as historical reference points.[25]

Most notably, Irving Howe's 1957 enduring study *Politics and the Novel* elevates the political novel that does not include explicit politics. He argues that a political novel should invest in "the *idea* of a society" (19) because such writing functions as "a work of internal tensions" in a political community against potential social obstacles (20, 39). These internal tensions, importantly, are not direct calls for social justice, notions in the vein of Sinclair's rally cries for socialism at the end of *The Jungle* or Stowe's desire for her readers to "feel right" in regard to American slavery. Didactic political novels rarely succeed for Howe because such texts seldom alter personal political commitments, leading political novelists often to seek a non-political resolution for a political theme (22, 92). He does not give a concrete definition for the political novel but instead focuses

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[24] Bachelder elaborates on this original popularity in his commentary on *The Jungle*'s 100th anniversary for *Mother Jones*: "Within months, the novel had been translated into 17 languages. Sinclair once received (and tactlessly shared with his friend Jack London) a letter from Doubleday informing him that 5,500 copies of the novel had been sold in one day. The many admirers of the novel included Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who wrote in a letter, 'that book of yours is unforgettable'; future British prime minister Winston Churchill, who, in one of two essays devoted to the novel, wrote that it 'pierces the thickest skull and most leathery heart'; George Bernard Shaw, who expressed his regard for Sinclair and *The Jungle* in his preface to *Major Barbara;* Bertolt Brecht, whose plays *In the Jungle of the Cities* and *St. Joan of the Stockyards* seem clearly to have been influenced by the novel; Eugene Debs, who wrote that *The Jungle* 'marks an epoch'; and, most notably, President Theodore Roosevelt."

[25] Within the previously mentioned *Mother Jones* article, Bachelder groups Sinclair's *The Jungle* with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as "(Bad but Important)" as a comparison to "*The Grapes of Wrath* (Political but Good)."

on “a dominant emphasis, a significant stress” as represented by any given text (16), with only Henry James provided as an example of a commendable American political writer from the turn of the century.[26] For Howe, most American political novels from the late 19th - early 20th century, either journalistic or parochial, could not be sustained because Americans were disgusted by politics (161-2): “The Americans failed, they could not help but fail, to see political life as an autonomous field of action; they could not focus upon politics long and steadily enough to allow it to develop according to its inner rhythms, for it bored or repelled them even as it tempted them” (163).

However, most protest narratives in the American tradition, particularly those written at the turn of the century, sought to inspire justice claims for a perceived marginalized group based around disparity in light of race, gender, or class distinctions. A didactic political novel like *The Jungle,* as argued in the introduction, represents a desire to create “literature as a weapon in the struggle for social, political, and economic justice” in regard to a discourse of needs for a particular community (Booker 7). Socialist fiction during the early 20th century such as London’s *The Iron Heel* (1908)[27] called for a future to cure social and economic struggles, and the “indefatigable” Sinclair steadily produced novels about needed social change for decades, with his most famous call for reform in the meatpacking industry as only one example (2). Despite the ineffectual

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[26] Howe includes an entire chapter on James titled “Henry James: The Political Vocation.” He also compares James more specifically to Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry Adams in “Some American Novelists: The Politics of Isolation”: “James, with fewer hopes or illusions than most American writers, shared in the feeling of distance and separation that Hawthorne and Adams had expressed, yet he found a way of avoiding its literary price; he found a way of avoiding that surrender to the ‘evasive tendency,’ that withdrawal from the urgencies of the subject matter, which occurs about midway through so many American novels dealing with the life of politics” (*Politics* 182).
[27] Again, for further discussion of London’s *The Iron Heel,* please see the second chapter.

subtlety, the social discussion of America's struggles accordingly became a call to recognize the political shortcomings of the time period, primarily the failings of government and business structures for the American populace at large.

Adaptations of didactic political works offer the opportunity to engage with previous political history as well as present political concerns despite the critical perception of such works. Although his work does not specifically consider adaptations, Whalen-Bridge rejects the label of American political fiction as a "sub-literary status" (2, 29); he also vitally argues that no novel has a "permanent political essence" but instead a "history, or rather several histories, since its various audiences may overlap, coincide, or never meet" (6-7).[28] Such a framing for the political novel encourages continued engagement with a fictional work's message, while it also opens up the potential for a rewriting of previous narratives for new audiences and new historical moments. Political fiction can not only allow readers to understand social and governmental changes over time by looking to the past (Cronin 11); they can also allow rewritings to encourage new engagement with similar struggles. As adaptations of previous political novels, such rewritten texts can engage in several histories as historical adaptations, as Bachelder demonstrates with his characters of Sinclair and Doctorow. Defne Ersin Tutan notes that "all historical representations are radically adaptive" (577), and she and Laurence Raw argue that moving from historical accuracy to a consideration of transformative works

[28] As a primary example, Whalen-Bridge discusses Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (6), with other texts in his study such as Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and London's *The Iron Heel* also fitting this definition.

allows for history to become democratized (11,15).[29] Tutan and Raw's democratic view of historical adaptation connects to an adaptor's intention to rewrite and revisit historical content with the contemporary moment in mind, as well as Whalen-Bridge's conception of a changeable political essence for political narratives. In this vein, the idea of several histories for a political novel can occur not only because a novel is written in a different time but also because the political narrative itself is intentionally rewritten for a new audience. Bachelder's novel assumes a 21st century audience with a particular knowledge base about the radical adaptation of Sinclair's possible existence at the very least; this recognition of change allows for new political discussion about the political novel's status and purpose during a new century.

Sinclair essentially functions as a representative for the failures of the American political novel in *U.S.!,* the culmination of all problematic presumptions about protest fiction. Any resurrection of Sinclair as the same Upton Sinclair cannot create any change within Bachelder's novel – and *U.S.!* wholeheartedly embraces this suspension without a clear path forward for the political novel as a genre. As Bachelder noted in 2004, satirical 21st century writers are "no doubt *funnier* than the muckrakers [such as Sinclair]. We're more laid-back and resigned to global capitalism." Yet 21st century content is also not "fired up about socialism and injustice" in the same manner as Sinclair's works, not as "sincere and passionate" with political conviction ("A Solider"). In effect, Bachelder argues that a political novel cannot be weaponized in the 21st century in a similar fashion to author Sinclair's actual narratives. As one of the fictional Sinclair's assistants claims in

[29] Tutan and Raw additionally argue that all historical adaptations are adaptations in the Darwinian sense (10) because creators have the "capacity to transform that world through experimental behavior" in order to "make sense of the world around them" (12,15).

U.S.!, “The books don’t matter. I’m sorry. […] The poor are still with us. We still have tainted meat. We still have layoffs. We still have an economic system that eats people to get stronger. We have hundreds of TV channels. Nobody gives a shit. This has not been a century of progress” (57). But a closer examination of Bachelder’s undead Sinclair actually demonstrates that Sinclair’s impact is not reduced because didactic literature is no longer imaginable; instead, it is because an exhumed and unchanged Sinclair, a Sinclair without adaptation, lacks cogence for 21st century concerns.

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Bachelder’s rewriting of Sinclair is directly inspired by the actual life of the leftist writer, with a dozen of his novels, his autobiography and his nonfiction writings on the 1934 EPIC campaign in California as particular inspiration.[30] A self-described socialist propagandist, he viewed his political novels as “weapon[s] in the struggle for freedom and justice” (qtd. in Booker 301) and his status as agitator welcome in order to incite political change (Cronin 77).[31] In his mind, all art was either propaganda for change or propaganda for the powerful (Arthur 199), and he consciously questioned authority in a battle for the betterment of all Americans (8, 122). Sinclair consumed social commentary such as Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) “in a continuous ebullition of glee” as he imagined potential social justice claims within his political

[30] Bachelder also received permission from the Upton Sinclair estate in order to reprint short passages from some of Sinclair’s works (303).
[31] Sinclair’s version of socialism was more a moral approach than a political theory (Arthur 38), a stance that allowed for a malleable relationship with the socialist movement during his lifetime. He left the American Socialist Party in 1917, with a published letter in the *Chicago Sunday Times* (171). Later in life, Sinclair shifted to support American for Democratic Action (ADA) and a more “liberal” approach to politics because he supported labor unions, the welfare state, civil rights for African Americans, and civil liberties (Coodley 154, 167).

narratives (Arthur 31). He wanted to directly combat what Veblen described as "conventional facts" instituted by the wealthy classes, seeking innovation despite its association with poverty and "bad form" (20, 132). And especially in his most emblematic works, such as the infamous *The Jungle*, Sinclair did confront those accepted narratives, or what Walter Lippmann recognized as a manufacturing of consent through increased propaganda in the 1920s (123), even if he did not always achieve his intended goals.

This discrepancy for Sinclair – the separation of his actual impact from his intentions – is emphasized throughout *U.S.!*, primarily because it accentuates what Howe describes as the inherent failing of didactic political fiction to change a reader's perspective. As a resurrected man, Sinclair's attempts to speak with an American public about socialism are portrayed only as abject failures. Just before another assassination attempt on his life, as one example, Bachelder's Sinclair once again tries to imagine his American audience as likely revolutionaries for the socialist movement. The crowd displays "nothing like hope" at a small graduation ceremony during his speech, and he considers the people to be a crowd just like "the faces he saw in California in '34" (22-3). He proclaims, "I know that we began in a competitive world, and I have no quarrel with the past. I am looking toward the future; and I say that when men compete with one another for wealth, they produce poverty for themselves" (23). The crowd, however, rejects his premise with angry jeers and patriotic singing before Sinclair is shot in the shoulder. He recognizes that "[t]hey were not quite ready" yet again as he listens to them leaving the gymnasium and slowly bleeds out on the stage (24). Sinclair's speech attempts to promote a united front and an imagined future for Americans in a late 20th

century moment, yet he persists as a symbol of the past for both the crowd in the gym as well as the 21st century readers outside of it. Even more provocatively, Bachelder's Sinclair remains fixated on a past within his own memories via his run for governor in California – his previous attempt at a socialist project which ultimately failed. He ends his speech physically injured and near death once again. Sinclair here is emphasized as stagnant instead of adaptive, a position represented both mentally and physically within the scene, a position reflective of stagnated American politics as well. The Sinclair character claims he is imagining a future, but he envisions the crowd as his own past; he therefore does not adapt his narrative or his approach, a reality reflected in the intentional representation for his character.

This scene functions as an active echo for actual Sinclair's politicized writings, such as *The Jungle* as well as his pamphlet *I, Governor of California and How I Ended Poverty: A True Story of the Future.* Concerning *The Jungle,* Sinclair famously stated that he wanted to write a novel that broke his readers' hearts and moved them to action. Unfortunately, that desire was not accomplished because readers were more horrified by the descriptions of meatpacking factories than the immigrant working conditions. Descriptions in *The Jungle* such as "a stream of bright red […] pouring out upon the floor" while workers stood in blood "half an inch deep" and "terrified shrieks" emitted from slaughtered hogs remained with readers: "It was like some horrible crime committed in a dungeon, all unseen and unheeded, buried out of sight and of memory" (40, 43). In fact, these ghastly descriptions were not lost to memory, unlike his rousing call to socialism at the novel's end, a call supposedly inciting "the rush that will never be checked, the tide that will never turn till it has reached its flood – that will be irresistible,

overwhelming – the rallying of the outraged workingman of Chicago" (341). Just like the crowded gymnasium, Sinclair inspired unanticipated action – in the speech's case a rejection of his socialist ideas, in the case of *The Jungle* a focus on reform within the meatpacking industry – but not actions connected to his intentions. As Sinclair wrote about *The Jungle*, "I aimed for their hearts but I hit their stomachs" (Coodley 40, 46). In *U.S.!,* the character of Sinclair aimed for a reformed future but only received the same reaction as he had in the past.

Sinclair's 1934 pamphlet and imagined utopia *I, Governor of California and How I Ended Poverty* extends this desire for potential political changes through literature as that narrative both includes Sinclair as a character and imagines a future which does not come to fruition. Actual Sinclair writes himself as the governor of California, a topic that he recognizes as humorous in a self-aware moment even as he claims that "this is the only material [he has]" (8). The pamphlet constructs a complete alternative society for a "new and self-maintaining world," "an experiment which will help to determine the future of mankind, and certainly the future of America" (15, 53). The imagined path for Sinclair is outlined as a "form of history" for his own constructed self and future Californian voters, reaching into the subsequent six years as a realization of his intended society: "First, I portray events, and then I put down my pen and try to make it happen. […] So far as I know, this is the first time an historian has set out to make history true" (8). Yet Sinclair's imagined future never existed because he lost the gubernatorial race – and actually avoided an assassination attempt because he lost (Arthur 279). He did not, in fact, create the outlined history from the pamphlet's pages. *I, Governor of California*'s intention accordingly represents a similar sentiment to Bachelder's Sinclair during his

speech to the Midwestern crowd, a scene that ends with physical injury and a clear rejection by the American public. By connecting these political works and their failures to his gymnasium speech, Sinclair appears naïve and stagnant in this moment, even as he proposes radical change. Although his didactic political writings recognize social ills, the intended advocacy is never realized, even as the author claimed to write the future's history himself.

Fictional Sinclair's physical body is an additional metaphor throughout *U.S.!,* not only for an unrealized past via American political novels but also for a decaying and deteriorating didactic American novel. This status is portrayed both as an extended process from the 20th century as well as a status still imagined by Bachelder at the start of the 21st century. *U.S.!* returns often to Sinclair's intense scars, wrinkled body, creaking bones, and painful existence as a reminder about his decaying influence within his own lifetime and as a canonized American novelist. From the character's first appearance in the novel as a physically resurrected man, Sinclair is described as "frail and ancient" (6). His body is "devastated" by his constant activism and assassinations, a "graphic history of the Left" depicted in the wounds upon his body (29, 30). This physical decay is matched by the rejection of his political messages throughout the novel: assassination attempts during political speeches (22-24); humorous "customer reviews" of over forty Sinclair novels on an Amazon-like webpage – some novels by the actual Sinclair during his lifetime and some created by Bachelder for the resurrected Sinclair – with either no customer comments, messages about his "old and gross" appearance, or company rejections of his political claims about their products (78-84); and an upcoming movie being made about a three-time Sinclair assassin starring Nicolas Cage as this American

hero over Sinclair himself (147). Likewise, the American public rejects any early 20th century novels from the actual Sinclair as well as any created late 20th century novels from the fictional Sinclair. Just like his distinctly missing finger is emphasized as he talks with Doctorow over Chinese food, the character's overall physical form is used as a further extension of his rejection by a capitalist-centered American society over time, an embodiment of his declining influence and deteriorating message despite his repeated resurrections.

As one example, the section titled "America Is Hard to See" directly addresses this physical manifestation of Sinclair's fading relevance, as well as the need for adaptation over direct recreation. The section includes the so-called "Sinclair Centerfolds," a series of photo-realistic nude paintings released in 1999 and created by an artist named Sam Treadway (85). Treadway's personal interactions with Sinclair are recounted in the novel, including the moment Sinclair uncomfortably displays all of his scars from various assassinations as evidence of his sacrifices for art and social justice (189). The American public within the novel, however, does not know if Sinclair actually posed for the images – and does not seem to care beyond salacious rumors. The paintings themselves are a metaphor for Sinclair's accepted political failures, while their rejection illustrates the needed transition from exhuming previous works to encouraging adaptive ones, primarily because their reception indicates a distance from the concerns of the past despite the painter Treadway's proposed intent.

Treadway discusses his inspiration for the nude paintings during an interview within the novel, and he claims to find the fictional Sinclair courageous, full of "stubborn ignorance" and "just-around-the-corner optimism" (87). But he also intentionally creates

photo-realistic paintings instead of taking photographs because he wants to use "an obsolete mode of representation" when depicting Sinclair (88). This decision emphasizes a recreation of Sinclair – one meant to imitate a perceived reality – as obsolete, impotent, and inconsequential. Although not much detail is available from the included fictional review, the paintings are described as "controversial and disturbing" because they display a completely nude Sinclair, his body ravaged by age and injuries. The art collection was "almost certainly" meant to create sympathy for Sinclair but instead portrayed him as "weak, frail, and feminine" (86-7). The three included portraits, "Mr. January," "Mr. April," and "Mr. December" (85), invoke the idea of a pin-up male body, a display of rippling muscles, obvious virility, and masculine power; instead, Sinclair's portraits conjure discomfort and disgust.[32]

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[32] It is possible to read the portraits as rejected due to Sinclair's failed masculinity as well, primarily framing his masculinity in terms of expectations for the early 20th century. This conflict maintains the rejection of Sinclair as a "faithful" adaptive work, still burdened by the conflicts of the past written on his nude form, while also showing the need for explicitly adaptive works from this early 20th century period because those narratives clearly still hold weight in the 21st century. Gail Bederman's seminal study of American masculinity contends that masculinity at the turn of the century became a narrative about identity, power, and physicality (15): "By 1930, 'masculinity' had developed into the mix of 'masculine' ideals more familiar to 20th century Americans – ideals like aggressiveness, physical force, and male sexuality" (19). These masculine expectations often appeared in political struggles, with the infamous President Theodore Roosevelt as the premier example, because any reformist lacked masculinity due to "unrestrained idealism or sentimentalism" inherent in his calls to action (Murphy 14, 173). The actual Sinclair acknowledged this kind of rugged Rooseveltian masculinity in politics, a masculinity he sought to emulate in his youth (Arthur 16). Particularly relevant for Sinclair's fictional representation, such masculine narratives have carried into 21st century political commentary as well: "despite important challenges to gender and political order waged by feminists, human rights activists, and others, dominant constructions of American national power and political leadership remain organized by a gendered vision that exalts red-blooded masculine power, more often tethered to a male body" (Murphy 209). Narratives about acceptable masculinity in the United States persist in politics, despite efforts to disrupt national expectations and gendered power dynamics.

In another section of the novel, Sinclair writes about his own perception of his physical body in his personal journal. Bachelder's Sinclair is keenly aware of his decaying status as the novel moves forward into the 21st century, and he despairs at both his physical form and his shunned political novels. In a 2002 entry in his personal journal, for example, Sinclair writes about a dream turned nightmare:

> A novel is written on my body. When people looked at me, they read the novel. They spun me around. They lifted the folds and wrinkles of my flesh to finish a chapter. I could feel the words on my face. They held me down and shaved my head to read my scalp. I asked for a sandwich and they got agitated. Suppose it all means something, but I've grown weary of the symbolism. (71-2)

The symbolism written on his fictional body, a representation only highlighted by Sinclair's personal despondency at the meaning, represents one politicized narrative about his didactic political novels, writings reduced to an ineffectual curiosity and only read in a limited capacity by a contemporaneous audience. Sinclair's novels, similar to this dream version of Sinclair, do not speak to a present audience any longer; they can represent needed change in the United States' past, the early 20th century in particular, but they do not seem as relevant or dynamic in the present moment. When these novels are brought unaltered yet outdated into a present, they are rejected because they cause agitation when a basic human need, which in the dream's construction is the need for food, is vocalized. Sinclair's body is reduced and malleable to societal demands. Just like his novels for a 21st century audience, his body itself has no continued power or agency, and his calls for advocacy are only discovered underneath unseemly folds and wrinkles. Even then, those words are covered up again when the readers cease touching his skin. They easily disappear and can be forgotten once more, with even the finally fatigued Sinclair "grown weary" by his own proposed claims. The capacity for success – for a

political message to be received, for change to eventually occur – officially exists because people read the novel on Sinclair's body. The despair arises because their only reaction is disgruntlement toward Sinclair for speaking at all. The people can shave him, lift him, and spin him without his control; Sinclair cannot speak, even for a (most likely meatless) bit of nourishment to sustain him or his texts.

This idea is extended in a subsequent 2003 journal entry, the dream changing from a crowd groping his malleable, silenced body to a crowd ignoring his decomposing corpse still able to hear the unchanged world around him: "Dreamed I was dead and lying in a casket. The casket was a big book that I had not finished. I could hear people talking. I could hear Jack [London] calling my name. I tried to open my eyes, but I couldn't. I tried to move my hands and fingers, but I was completely dead" (72). In this dream, "people" have come to Sinclair's funeral and gathered to see his dead body, a body unlike his typically resurrected one but instead a "completely" dead body without any physically moving parts. Fellow writer Jack London may somehow be calling out for a deceased Sinclair by name, but most of the crowd is simply talking around him, maybe present but not engaged in reviving Sinclair or his ideas. Rather, Sinclair conceives that he is trapped within a novel he can never complete, a didactic political novel just as lifeless as the author desperate to finish it. As these dreams show, Sinclair's novels can be read and known, and people can come to see the displayed dead form of his political novels as a casket of America's leftist past. But Sinclair's writing does not create new conversation for a 21st century American public simply by either resurrection or even minimal presence. A novel may be consumed without any allowance for its message to relate with a contemporaneous moment; it can be talked around more than recognized. Therefore,

this dream journal entry showcases a revived Sinclair not as a fresh message for the 21st century but an aging narrative – or a potentially deceased one on display – with all of the author's scars and casket of a novel representing previous failures for didactic political literature. This Sinclair is dead: at best an unwanted, rotting piece of meat. Sinclair and his novels cannot simply be resurrected without remaining weary or entombed, controlled or rotten, either through supernatural resurrections or physical reprintings of novels. Without change, a resurrected text is simply not enough.

Sinclair's dreams recognize that any resurrection of Sinclair as the same Upton Sinclair cannot engender change – and, by extension, the political approaches he represents are similarly situated. It therefore becomes imperative that, although any political adaptation can attempt to resurrect a similar social message from a past narrative, such works *must also* rewrite in order to align with 21st century concerns. The rewritten character of Upton Sinclair, and his rejection by American society throughout *U.S.!*'s narrative, represents this failure of leftist politics and protest novels over the last century to incite political change. But this "defeated marginality," as Mark Fisher describes the Left's attachment to romanticized failure (78), need not remain the only possible narrative. While *U.S.!* may cease to romanticize these failures through Sinclair's rejection, the novel does not yet leave behind an attachment to leftist failure. It does, however, precisely demonstrate the need for American political writers to do so. Bachelder's *U.S.!* deliberately showcases why the United States has rejected a leftist form of politics, in particular through the didactic political novel and its historically radical approach to confronting socio-economic disparities, via the rejection of an old, outdated, and scarred Sinclair. This adaptation is conscious and purposeful in order to "resurrect"

discussion about the political novel's past. As an explicitly adaptive novel, however, *U.S.!* unknowingly represents a transitional moment for 21st century political narratives – a tipping point for leftist American political novels to become adaptations so that such writings can both recognize the unfulfilled radical advocacy of the country's past as well as imagine adapted radical claims for an imagined American future. In order to understand such a capacity, however, the gap in time from Sinclair's political writing to Bachelder's satirical novel must be understood. And while Sinclair may represent a rejection of literary didacticism, his pairing with Doctorow appropriately complicates the discussion about political novels and their history in the United States.

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Doctorow, considered by many literary critics as the last great American political novelist (Wutz and Murphet 1), refused labels as an author; he did not see himself as either a postmodern or historical author specifically, and the varied genres of his works from detective fiction to science fiction support his claim (2, 7-8). However, critical attention tends to focus on Doctorow's early historical works, such as *The Book of Daniel* and *World's Fair,*[33] with particular emphasis placed on his novel *Ragtime.*[34] As such, he

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[33] Although this chapter focuses on *Ragtime* because Bachelder's novel does so, both *World's Fair* and *The Book of Daniel* engage in leftist political commentary about the early 20th century, in particular criticism of capitalism in the United States. *World's Fair* culminates in a trip to the 1939 World's Fair exhibit World of Tomorrow, which models the future in the form of a child's toy and excludes minority groups (253, 284). *The Book of Daniel* rewrites the Rosenberg trial via Paul and Rochelle Isaacson as a reduction of the American left (110); the novel includes an extended discussion about Disneyland as a combination of commercially created national narratives for the "mythic rituals of culture" (286).

[34] As Wutz and Murphet note: "The relative critical silence surrounding his work is certainly far out of sync with Doctorow's extraordinary output after the postmodern turn, just as it is with his wide readership and the acknowledgements his contemporaries have bestowed upon him. What is more, much of what little work has been done on Doctorow

is most often positioned as a political author by literary critics, and a leftist political author more specifically, despite writing during a period when political novelists in the United States were “anathema to a culture in which dissent was discouraged in American fiction” (Murgatroyd 95).[35] As Fredric Jameson observes, Doctorow was “one of the few serious and innovative leftist novelist at work” in late 20th century America, an “epic poet of the disappearance of the American radical past, of the suppression of older traditions and moments of the American radical tradition” (qtd. in Booker 79-80). And importantly in the context of *U.S.!,* Doctorow was a very different kind of political novelist to Sinclair, one with a divergent philosophy on literature.

Doctorow’s personal thoughts on the political novel were provocative, particularly because he often argued that all writing is inherently political while critics proclaimed his writing as explicitly political for a leftist agenda. From his standpoint, one far more in line with Howe’s perspective than Sinclair’s didactic approach, it seemed impossible for “a novelist not to recognize the political implications of his work” because all novels are political in some fashion (“Mr. Ragtime” 11). The label of political novelist would therefore only apply when “the politics of [a] novel are not the prevailing politics”

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seems, almost inevitably, to circle back to *Ragtime,* as if to suggest that Doctorow got stuck in his tracks, while in reality it appears to be the critical community that is unable to overcome its self-enclosing loop and recognize the creative evolution of a writer long after he had made, not just one, but several, first major marks” (9). Bachelder does continue this literary focus on *Ragtime* in his novel, although it is important to note that *U.S.!* emphasizes several Doctorow interviews as well.

[35] Murgatroyd specifically employs Whalen-Bridges’ concept of the submerged novel for his analysis of Doctorow’s *The Waterworks* in order to present this argument, connecting the likes of Melville, Doctorow, the Gilded Age, and the Reagan Era in his article (103). He argues that *The Waterworks* is Doctorow’s best example of the artist’s role in society (96); I would add that this concept is also present in several of the texts discussed in this chapter such as *World’s Fair* and *Ragtime.*

so that “the politics stand out” in critical assessment (Doctorow and Papaleo 19). *The Book of Daniel,* for example, may be an “explicitly political novel in that it deals with politics and political people” in Doctorow’s words, but he “never thought of [himself] as a political person” despite his historicized and politicized subject matters (“The Writer” 45). The intentional use of “real (and fake) history” in his novels often invokes the political ramifications of literary intervention, with a desire to grapple with important social issues instead of the interpersonal, “miniaturized” elements of American living (Navasky 231, Wutz and Murphet 2, 8). But the reactions to Doctorow’s creative representations of historical content consequently say more about the late 20th-early 21st century than about Doctorow as an artist, as Doctorow elaborated to a publishing friend:

> ‘It seems to me more a comment on our time than on anything I have written,’ he once observed, ‘that a novel that contains concern for our society is seen to be unusual. *Moby-Dick* is a political novel. *The Scarlet Letter* is a political novel. Dostoyevsky and Conrad wrote political novels, although when they’re taught little attention is paid to, say, Conrad’s conservative politics. But to think that I’m writing to advance a political program misses the point. To call a novel political today is to label it, and to label it is to refuse to deal with what it does.’ (Navasky 235)

Doctorow’s statement grappled with the dismissal of his novels as political, as well as the resulting refusal to understand novels as literary works with integrated political elements. Even within his own defense, however, his rejection of didactic literature – such as novels written by Sinclair – remain a key element to his argument about the relationship between literature and politics in American fiction.

For Doctorow, this tension was realized in the “infernal question – the degree of engagement” (“Politics” 64). While he described himself as a “leftist” in his personal politics, he remained wary of “ideological fervour” because “clear, definitive ideologies have discredited themselves by their adherents”; labelled as a political author yet

distanced from direct didacticism, Doctorow found himself in what he described as "a very exhausting place to be" ("Politics" 67-8).[36] This degree of engagement is meant to recognize "some kind of new aesthetic possibility that does not undermine aesthetic rigor," unlike those writers with a "fixed political position" unable to enact positive change (64). For example, Doctorow contrasted his literary intentions with early 20th century authors such as Jack London and Theodore Dreiser, writers who did allow a so-called "kind of death" into their writing. These writers came from a time of "duped individuals and bad proletariat novels," a distinct contrast to the desire for "pure" literature in the late 20th century ("The Beliefs" 107): "Writers of the thirties, of course, were explicitly committed, many of them, to a specific political point of view. And that leads to the interesting question of to what degree a writer can understand or know that he is political in order to get his work done" ("The Writer" 44). This death – a death exemplified and peculiarly embodied by Bachelder's interpretation of Sinclair – emerges when a writer strays from a literary focus to embrace a more didactic one. A Doctorow novel, therefore, will often signal at capitalism's dangers or the perils of inequality as a degree of engagement, but such moral outrage is "tinged with resignation" at its limited

[36] Interestingly, Bachelder's Doctorow does not state his political opinions in an included fictional interview beyond a desire for universal justice, perhaps to contrast even more with Sinclair (*U.S.!,* 105).

likelihood to engender direct action (Murgatroyd 103-7).[37] Such engagement becomes a powerful contrast to the didactic messaging found in a novel by Sinclair.[38]

Take *Ragtime* as an example of this tension between political engagement and literary death, in particular because it is the writing style and approach adapted by Bachelder in *U.S.!* for the crucial "Professional Messiah" section with Doctorow and Sinclair's lunch meeting. Critical responses to *Ragtime* often focus on the novel's exploration about the failures of radicalism, the successes of capitalism, and the death of the American dream especially for marginalized groups via its historical characters (Bealer 126, Booker 83). Harry Houdini's personal desire to escape from confining societal norms, Emma Goldman's physical liberation and sexual freedom, Henry Ford's acceleration of oppressive working conditions, Harry K. Thaw's dangerous masculinity enabled by capitalism, Evelyn Nesbit's feminized sexuality as a marketplace product (Bealer 113-20): all of these historical figures and more showcase the "social, economic, and political forces suppressing radical political change" in the early 20th century (126). Yet these figures are rewritten within what Doctorow calls a "false document," a novel

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[37] Doctorow's desire to rewrite for a contemporary audience about a national past does hold power, and authors such as Joyce Carol Oates have written with similar purpose, as outlined in the introduction. *The Waterworks* as a fictional narrative showcases the limitations of a politically submerged novel. Murgatroyd argues: "Yet however much the novel may manifest Doctorow's moral outrage at the state of America, its nostalgic recall of a more democratically idealist spirit is unlikely to disturb the hegemony of the financial and political elite. Its anger is tinged with resignation, its weight of despair negated by the commercial need to produce a happy ending" (104). Unlike a novel with an outright call for advocacy, a submerged political novel as defined by Whalen-Bridge "forever runs the risk of making the critique it contains appear safe, its subversive intent one more thing to consume uncritically and unthinkingly" (Murgatroyd 107).

[38] In this chapter, the focus primarily remains on discussions of class differences, even though race, gender, and sexuality issues are recognized. Further discussion of race and gender are included in the second chapter about an adaptation of Jack London's *The Iron Heel* and the third chapter about an adaptation of Richard Wright's *Native Son.*

intended to highlight the false binary between fiction and nonfiction ("Novelist" 5, "False Documents" 163). Doctorow's historical "facts" in *Ragtime* are meant to supplant the authority of historicism, full of "facts that will leave [readers'] heads spinning" as a response to a powerful "culture of factuality" around American historical narratives ("How" 69). This focus echoes Hayden White's analysis on the artificiality of historical facts, as an "imaginary discourse about real events [that] may not be less 'true' for being imaginary" (57). Doctorow claims that everything in *Ragtime* is "true," perhaps not a "verifiable truth" but a narrative truth represented for a contemporaneous American audience (Doctorow and Papaleo 17): "It defies facts. Give 'em all sorts of facts – made-up facts, distorted facts […] halfway between fiction and history" (Doctorow, "Novelist" 5). Doctorow's concept of created historical content confronts Sinclair's didactic use of "literature as a weapon" because Sinclair's weapon was specifically realized via his reported facts – facts about the meatpacking industry, about the oil industry, about political reform and the likelihood of socialism in California.

Ragtime itself includes criticism of Sinclair's didactic approach, to particularly biting effect. Doctorow's commentary in the novel is overtly political in its discussion of class disparity and unmet needs for the poor, with a constant theme of the failed American dream due to consumer culture throughout the novel (Booker 86). Simultaneously, however, *Ragtime* seemingly rejects any true influence for political fiction via a presumed reference to Sinclair's *The Jungle*:

> One hundred Negroes a year were lynched. One hundred miners were burned alive. One hundred children were mutilated. There seemed to be quotas for these things. There seemed to be quotas for death by starvation. […] It became fashionable to honor the poor. At palaces in New York and Chicago people gave poverty balls. Guests came dressed in rags and ate from tin plates and drank from chipped mugs. […] One hostess invited everyone to a stockyard ball. Guests were wrapped in long aprons and their heads covered with white caps. They dined and danced while hanging carcasses of bloody beef trailed around the walls on moving pulleys. Entrails spilled on the floor. The proceeds were for charity. (Doctorow, *Ragtime* 40)

Not only does this passage appear to evoke the meatpacking industry of the time and therefore Sinclair's infamous political novel, but it also derides both Sinclair's attempt at political change via writing as well as the wealthy's disregard for any actual suffering by lower classes.[39] Just as Sinclair's assistant declares in *U.S.!*, the books have not succeeded in their advocacy; at most, they have created a social awareness about horrific deaths due to working conditions, knowledge which has inspired party themes for the wealthy and little for the poor. Doctorow portrays the wealthy's continued callowness as a failure of the American left within *Ragtime*'s storyworld and political history, a business-minded country more obsessed with quotas and performance than human suffering. Doctorow's novel criticizes the white wealthy parties, yes, but it also recognizes the slow death of didactic political literature – an acceptance of hanging carcasses and bloody entrails without any sign of change, a charity event put on by the

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[39] Doctorow also conjures the horrors of the meatpacking industry in his later novel *The Waterworks:* "[…] the lungs of the young country boy fill for the first time with the sickening air of the meat district… the stockyards and slaughterhouses. Perhaps he thinks he landed not in New York but on the chest of a monstrous carcass and is inhaling the odor of its huge bloody being" (83-4). This moment does seem to reference more the social and environmental changes due to industrialization rather than *Ragtime's* scene about the hypocrisy of the wealthy class as well as the failures of social advocacy, even as the primary narrative of *The Waterworks* considers the perils of extreme wealth and power. Additionally, *The Waterworks* is set in the late 19th century, prior to the publication of *The Jungle,* while *Ragtime* is set in the early 20th century.

very economic class that dehumanizes minority workers in need of advocacy and compassion.

In his EPIC Campaign's pamphlet, Sinclair claimed that he wanted to create history as a future historian; Doctorow instead insists upon a space between facts and history for his novels. Bachelder's *U.S.!* confronts this separation as a key difference between the two authors through his characters' conversation. Fictional Sinclair insists that Doctorow tells a "true history" while also claiming it all as a created "story"; he laments that "[f]acts are important. Lynchings are important. Child labor is important. You did not make this up" (107) as a direct echo to the *Ragtime* scene previously examined. In response, Doctorow shrugs and reiterates that narratives can only be more or less convincing, not more or less factual, an answer that deflates the emotionally engaged Sinclair (108). Sinclair here represents a desire to pursue facts and history in literature as justification for political change, while Doctorow seeks historical content in order to challenge dominant narratives for a contemporaneous audience. Sinclair is the ineffectual death of political didacticism in literature, Doctorow the resigned and exhausted literature engaged in only a limited degree of political context.

What this comparative context reveals largely depends on the adapted representations of Sinclair and Doctorow, as well as the use of Doctorow's *Ragtime* as literary work to adapt. As Doctorow himself would argue, both men's backgrounds are full of historical "facts," but *U.S.!* itself crafts a unique narrative and an alternative perspective based on its storytelling. Doctorow's work does not attempt political change but instead political critique, and Bachelder follows in this tradition with his satirical focus. As previously noted, "Professional Messiah" in particular embraces *Ragtime*'s

writing style with methods such as a third person perspective, a lack of quotations, and blunt historical observations.[40] *U.S.!* even rewrites certain lines from Doctorow's novel and embraces the idea of a failed leftist narrative in the United States beyond connections to Sinclair. *Ragtime*, for instance, claims that "[p]atriotism was a reliable sentiment in the early 1900's" because Theodore Roosevelt was President (3), while *U.S.!* declares that the American flag has lost any patriotic meaning because "the real was no longer accessible" in the 21st century (102). A patriotic symbol in one novel, an American president, can reliably bring Americans together, while the postmodern 21st century no longer has access to reality or factual certainty. In another example, *Ragtime* opens with economically secure white Americans from the turn of the century slowly realizing that, despite the perspectives perpetuated by their class biases, minority groups *do* exist in the country. "Apparently," as noted in the novel, "there *were* Negroes. There *were* immigrants" (4, emphasis original). This slow realization is echoed in "Professional Messiah" when 21st Americans must realize that apparently "[n]ot everyone was grateful to the USA" for its international military interventions (*U.S.!,* 103). In this case, certain groups of Americans – implied in both cases as white and middle-class – slowly come to uncomfortable realizations, either about their fellow citizens or their international standing. These rewritings thus recognize a reduction in positive national sentiment and political engagement through the perspective of Bachelder's updates to *Ragtime*. National political narratives, as well as the political novel according to this sentiment, have lost

[40] Wutz and Murphet specifically describe *Ragtime* as full of short sentences as if a photograph, a style that allows the reader opportunity to imbue meaning (5). Such analysis further connects Doctorow's writing style in *Ragtime* to John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* Trilogy, as later discussed in this chapter.

influence over the last century, a judgement that reverberates alongside Doctorow's political and literary fatigue. But these echoes only lead to the primary rewriting of the section: a shift from *Ragtime*'s conversation between J.P. Morgan and Henry Ford to *U.S.!*'s conversation between Upton Sinclair and E.L. Doctorow.

While these two pairings are distinctly different in numerous ways, an important comparison remains because the included conversations detail a desire for fellowship as well as a recognition of influence beyond mortality. Morgan and Sinclair seek a certain kind of truth, connected yet inverse in their desires: Morgan an imperial class perpetuated via reincarnation as continued rulers of international business, and Sinclair an intentional sacrifice literally possible because his physical body can be resurrected for continued life.[41] Morgan and Sinclair pursue their perceived successors in Ford and Doctorow, the new money business mogul and the political novelist of the late 20th century respectively.[42] Neither man wants to be alone in his cause, and each therefore creates a

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[41] Doctorow expands upon this continued life for the extremely wealthy in *The Waterworks,* as wealthy American businessmen with fatal diagnoses seek "the enterprise of endless life" by "denying their own mortality" (226, 233). *The Waterworks* does recount the eventual deaths of the wealthy men after experimentation, deaths that come after the men have lost most mental faculties and awareness. These attempts further emphasize the inability for perpetual life without reincarnation or change, in this case within a later Doctorow work.

[42] As an interesting contrast to the religious connotations around Morgan and Sinclair, Ford is primarily framed as an anti-Semite in both *Ragtime* and *U.S.!*. Ford responds to Morgan's ideas about reincarnation by rejecting any commonality with Jewish individuals: "Ford pondered this. Exceptin the Jews, he muttered. Morgan didn't think he had heard correctly. I beg your pardon, he said. The Jews, Ford said. They ain't like anyone else I know. There goes your theory up shits creek. He smiled" (*Ragtime,* 147). Bachelder has Sinclair reference this passage during his conversation with Doctorow: "You made Ford a Jew-hater. I was there at this time, Mr. Doctorow. […] He did in fact hate Jews. He gave money to the Nazis" (*U.S.!,* 107). Importantly, Ford's anti-Semitism is not paralleled in the character of Doctorow – Doctorow was Jewish himself – only used as a method to discuss accuracy and advocacy in political literature by Sinclair. The only parallel discussed here, as detailed, is the concept of a successor.

relationship with his successor via secret clubs or continued dinner meetings (*Ragtime* 153, *U.S.!* 109).[43] Yet Ford and Doctorow do not assume the same steadfast fervor as their counterparts. Morgan seeks out Egyptian religious teachings and builds his own pyramid in order to ensure his personal reincarnation, a method to retain his status as "a monarch of the invisible, transnational kingdom of capital whose sovereignty was everywhere granted" (*Ragtime* 138, 308), while Sinclair views his job as a sacrificial lamb for the advocacy of the working class a worthwhile application of his writing proficiency. Of course, Morgan's desire is established but his reincarnation never realized in *Ragtime;* he remains a powerful American force through the continued existence of his banking empire, his religious worship truly at the altar of capitalism until his death. And Sinclair, as previously detailed, is resurrected without any godlike powers or miraculous impact on American politics. He is a punching bag, a man unheard in his coffin of a book by the start of the 21st century. Their counterparts come "occasionally for dinner at inconspicuous ethnic restaurants" or join "the most secret and exclusive club in America, The Pyramid," even as those counterparts never become as devoted or enraptured by their predecessors' arguments; and only The Pyramid has impact that "persists to this day," while the causal dinner meetings become failed attempts for Sinclair to convince Doctorow about telepathy (*U.S.!* 109, *Ragtime* 153). These men both dream big, seeking truth through devout language and glorious burdens from the country's past. But one can

[43] As previously described in this chapter, Sinclair desires Doctorow's friendship in *U.S.!* because he wants to find another leftist political writer willing to advocate for the working class. In *Ragtime,* Morgan also seeks an equal: "[Morgan] had sensed in Ford's achievement a lust for order as imperial as his own. This was the first sign given to him in some time that he might not be alone on the planet. Pierpont Morgan was that classic American hero, a man born to extreme wealth who by dint of hard work and ruthlessness multiplies the family fortune till it is out of sight" (138).

return to life while the other can retain influence, and this difference pinpoints the intended argument for *U.S.!* about American political fiction. The "Professional Messiah" section suggests that physical life and lasting influence are not the same – and they are dissimilar because presence and power are not equivalent. Doctorow's pairing of Morgan and Ford showed exclusionary capitalists with continued recognition and business influence, talking via secret club meetings in a lavish mansion about their status as "special people" with "secret wisdom" (*Ragtime* 149). Their legacy may be tainted and selfish, but it is powerful. What Bachelder's adaptation of this scene appears to argue is that Sinclair's desire for "facts" in order to support advocacy is not possible, in part because such writing is undesirable and in part because Doctorow sees Sinclair's style as a "death" for literature which cannot be exhumed. The character may live, but any sacrifice for his literary works only reproduces failure and despondency. Yet such a reading is limited, a product of 20th century opinions on American political literature and its purpose, and Morgan's idea about reincarnation over resurrection oddly stands as a lesson in the power of change over stagnation. Instead of extending the same life – or the same narrative as the case may be with adaptive political texts in the 21st century – a rebirth as adaptation can create a new influence. This successful rebirth need not just be at the altar of business and capitalism as ironically produced by Morgan and Ford; if a politics of failure is rejected as Mark Fisher proposes (78), political activism and literature through adaptations such as those of Sinclair and Doctorow can engage in powerful advocacy as well. And the literature of the 2010s, as examined in later chapters, embraces this potential, even as the majority of Bachelder's satirical novel does not consciously perceive such a path for didactic political literature.

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Although *U.S.!* remains primarily focused on Sinclair's failures and, in the case of the "Professional Messiah" section, Doctorow's resignation, the novel also includes one additional example of adaptation in regard to an American political novelist. As briefly mentioned earlier in this chapter, *U.S.!* includes a "Camera Eye" section in the spirit of John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy. Unlike the examples of Doctorow and Sinclair, this small section of the novel showcases the capacity for adaptation of political texts with 21st century concerns, even as the novel then returns to a history of failures through Sinclair's continued deficiencies. From the novel's title *U.S.!* alone – both a reference to Sinclair's penchant for dramatic titles and exclamation marks as well as a reference to Dos Passos' literary trilogy – it is clear that Dos Passos is a presence in this novel, another powerful foil similar to Doctorow despite his death in the 20th century (and absence of any resurrection ability).[44] Additionally, Doctorow himself was inspired by Dos Passos' early political work because Dos Passos was "self-effacing" and "ambitious" with his writing ("How" 69), and the *U.S.A.* trilogy is often compared to *Ragtime* in particular as having a "structural and ideological connection" as "historically conscious fiction" (Foley 85-7). Even more interesting than these connections, however, is the context of Bachelder's brief adaptation. In his two page "The Camera Eye" section, Bachelder presses beyond a resurrected discussion about the American political novel, as demonstrated with Sinclair and Doctorow, and rewrites Dos Passos' style and intention

[44] Sinclair's titles and punctuation usage are often mocked within *U.S.!* as well, with the novel's title meant as ironic. As an example, one section of the novel is titled "Some Notes on Punctuation," and it contains an entire page of exclamation marks. A brief interview follows, with Sinclair claiming that the 1,539 exclamation marks included in his novel *Oil!* were not enough (170-1).

from the *U.S.A.* trilogy for a 21st century audience reflecting on an American past. Dos Passos is definitively not resurrected. Instead, his work is adapted – altered with the 21st century in mind – in a manner that allows for creative interpretation and potential didactic writings. The *U.S.A.* section is not the same as Dos Passos' original novels – and that element is key to understanding its importance.

Like Doctorow, Dos Passos provides contrast with Sinclair, one that is possible due to Dos Passos' elevated literary reception as well as his converted political opinions over his lifetime. Unlike Doctorow, however, Dos Passos wrote contemporaneously with Sinclair and was personally impacted by the turmoil of the early 20th century. Dos Passos as a literary author is most famous for his classic trilogy of "radical literature" the *U.S.A.* trilogy (xvii) – *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *Nineteen-Nineteen* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1933) – novels that, in a curious reflection on *The Jungle,* are "more respected than read" in the 21st century (Hanson). These works were all influenced by his experiences during World War I, the complexity of industrial and technological change during the Progressive Era, and the overall difficulty of life at the start of the 20th century for working class American citizens in his contemporaneous moment (Ludington 3, 180). Referencing works such as Bellamy's *Looking Backward,* Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class,* and even Sinclair's *The Jungle,*[45] Dos Passos' early works such as the *U.S.A.* trilogy often "rang with sympathy for the underdog" even as they had "a seeming

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[45] Here are some examples from Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy: The character Mac starts reading *Looking Backward* when he is learning about socialism, and he speaks with a fan of Bellamy's work during his travels in *The 42nd Parallel* (46, 81); Mac also goes to the Chicago stockyards at one point to hear an Upton Sinclair speech (108). Journalist Mary French reads socialist works such as *The Jungle* and *The Theory of the Leisure Class* during her youth in *The Big Money* (113, 140).

objectivity" due to his interest in American history (Ludington 76, 45). His characters were caught up in "a swirl of social and economic forces beyond their control" in order to reflect social and political conflict in the United States in the early 20th century, with a focus on materialism, conformity, political corruption, and lack of communication (64); his experiences in the Spanish Civil War, however, "disillusioned" him with the American left, and Dos Passos' political ideologies shifted from socialism in the 1930s to a pro-McCarthyism stance by the 1950s (242, xvii).[46] As an intentional contrast to Sinclair's unending advocacy even beyond death in this novel, it is important to frame Dos Passos in the role of a man famous for his literary achievement as a leftist political novelist during the early 20th century; yet he was also a man disillusioned with socialism by the end of his lifetime, another contrast to the "indefatigable" Sinclair.

After his experiences in Europe during the First World War, Dos Passos intended to engage with "the grotesques [and] the farce-like quality of American life" to confront

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[46] Just as political terms and positions are hard to establish conclusively in 21st century common usage, Dos Passos exemplifies an American's struggle in the early 20th century with political labels via his own personal politics. He primarily saw himself as anti-capitalist in the early 1920s (Ludington 199), with a vote for socialist candidate Eugene Debs and a politically active public life during the 1926 Sacco and Vanzetti case as examples (203, 243-6). Yet Dos Passos started to retreat from a socialist ideology even as he finished the *U.S.A.* trilogy and was perceived as at his most radical position by the start of the 1930s (310). In a letter to friend Edmund Wilson, Dos Passos decided to label himself at this time as a "middle-class liberal" despite his inability to give a firm definition for that term (290). The writer started to prioritize American democratic institutions over communist or socialist parties in the United States as WWII loomed as a threat (331, 341). His final break with the left occurred during the Spanish Civil War because his friend Jose Robles was falsely accused of being a "fascist spy" and killed, which he believed was instigated by Soviet intervention (366, 371). Dos Passos then rejected "revolutionary politics" of all kinds and communism in particular, a stance that led to his approval of Senator Joseph McCarthy's political "hunt for communists" (375, 460). By the end of his life, he felt betrayed by liberalism, supported conservative candidate Richard Nixon, and advocated for gradualism in light of the Civil Rights Movement (500-2).

the old systems of power and find a radical alternative, as detailed in his personal journal (qtd. in Ludington 165). The *U.S.A.* trilogy became his most famous discourse on these qualities as “a series of reportages of the time”: not a series of novels according to Dos Passos but a narrative series covering a lengthy period of time “in which characters appeared and reappeared” via “something a little more accurate than fiction” in order to create “a contemporary commentary on history’s changes, always as seen by some individual’s ears, felt through some individual’s nerves and tissues” (qtd. in Ludington 256). For Dos Passos, the novelist was an historian for his own time, and the best narratives would combine fiction and history (257). The *U.S.A.* trilogy was an exemplary, literary American political novel during this period of upheaval and economic struggle, even though Dos Passos later mourned the “demise of […] historical possibilities that at one time or another had given him hope in the future” (qtd. in Ludington 484).[47]

The trilogy of *The 42nd Parallel*, *Nineteen-Nineteen*, and *The Big Money* is comprised of four modes of narrative: several fictional narratives based on a variety of intersecting American characters, biographies of major American political and entertainment figures, the “Newsreel” sections, and the “Camera Eye” sections. And while the biography sections and the “Newsreel” sections take details from American

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[47] Primarily, Dos Passos wanted to be a “neutral observer” despite still viewing his writing as activism during his lifetime (Ludington 292). He claimed that political terms such as “liberalism” in the 1920s – when he was a member of the leftist movement – had changed significantly by the 1950s: “Liberalism, for example, used to be equated with enthusiasm for individual rights; now it tends to mean identification with central governing power” (477). Liberal became a “term of abuse” for Dos Passos because he believed that its meaning had “decayed” compared to its use at the turn of the century (501). These thoughts on protest and liberalism are important to recognize for a reading of Bachelder’s adapted “The Camera Eye” section in particular because his childhood reflection of play-acting protest seemingly contrasts Dos Passos’ radical stances in the *U.S.A.* trilogy with the author’s personal political beliefs in the 1950s and 1960s.

news and popular culture – commentary which includes some historical figures also considered by Doctorow such as a persecuted Eugene Debs (*The 42nd,* 50-2), a powerful J. P. Morgan (*Nineteen,* 337-41), and an anti-Semitic Henry Ford (*Big,* 70-7) – it is the "Camera Eye" concept that Bachelder rewrites. These different elements apply "the cinematic technique of montage to literature" by focusing on contrast (Hock 20), a pastiche style of writing recreated by Bachelder in his own "The Camera Eye" section. While the other sections are meant to show conflicting perspectives, the "Camera Eye" sections are Dos Passos' personal experiences as "stream of consciousness fragments" (Pizer 417),[48] sections marked by a lack of editing and a considerable number of asides (Hock 23). These segments allow for an observation of history written as a sort of prose poem (Ludington 257, 259). As Stephen Hock argues, "the Camera Eye sections function as parenthetical notations to the rest of the text, providing the personally involved view of the reality that the other sections describe only at a distance" (23). During these autobiographical "Camera Eye" sections in *The 42nd Parallel* in particular, Dos Passos explored his childhood memories[49] and his view of himself as a "double foreigner" outside of American culture (14, 24).[50] This approach allowed him to address both his

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[48] Most critics believe that the "Camera Eye" sections are vital to understanding the themes of the entire trilogy, even though Dos Passos himself claimed that the sections were a subjective contrast to the other intentionally objective sections (Pizer 418).
[49] Because Bachelder reflects on an innocent moment from childhood in his "The Camera Eye" section, he adapts specifically from *The 42nd Parallel,* as this novel is the only one focused on Dos Passos' childhood (Ludington 290).
[50] While the "Camera Eye" sections are consistently acknowledged as autobiographical, it is important to note that Dos Passos also created characters based on friends and acquaintances from his travels. As Ludington notes, "In creating his characters Dos Passos drew closely from life" (443). Some examples from the *U.S.A.* trilogy include Mac, who is based on his friend Gladwin Bland from his travels to Mexico (251), and J. Ward Moorehouse, who is based on American publicist Ivy Lee from his travels to Russia (269). Ernest Hemingway also appears in his novel *Chosen Country* (1951) – not

personal struggles as well as his views on American culture. Dos Passos constantly treated characters from the outside rather than in depth, with his intention to "define by actions and surfaces, not to present psychological studies" (64, 130). The autobiographical "Camera Eye" sections were a contrast to this writing style, a style that Bachelder importantly emulates in his adapted version.

U.S.! intentionally adapts the "Camera Eye" section because the novel here focuses on the impact of a perceived past on an individual and his immediate family. Bachelder's version starts with a first-person perspective and a key narrative element within the novel's frame, even if that reality is only a story relayed to the narrator by his family members instead of personally experienced: "It is the late summer of 1968 and my sister lisa is five and I am not born yet and muckraker upton sinclair will die in a few months on november 25 at age ninety having lost three wives having lost his fame having lost it is true his radical dreams" (*U.S.!* 194).[51] In this version, Sinclair is determined as deceased – at the historical date of the author's death no less – with a later resurrection presumed due to the rest of the novel's plot. Here within the context of his naturally lived lifetime, Sinclair is important enough for the narrator to reference as a failed radical writer within the section, the symbol of continued radical social desires, while the focus of "The Camera Eye" itself attends to a parody of outspoken radical didacticism as

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in a flattering light – which led to Hemingway's unflattering portrayal of Dos Passos in his 1964 book *A Moveable Feast* (456).

[51] While I cannot find confirmation that "The Camera Eye" section in *U.S.!* is autobiographical, the style does emulate Dos Passos' work; the timeline also fits with the author's birthdate. I believe that, even if the content is entirely fictional, the passage is intended to be read with the spirit of Dos Passos' sections in mind. However, I am referring to the speaker in "The Camera Eye" section as the narrator for the sake of candor and clarity.

contrast: the narrator's older sister as a young girl pretending to protest in her suburban neighborhood, a parodic reflection of the Civil Rights Movement. Already within this frame, an adaptation of a major historical moment has mutated for a new environment (Hutcheon 32), adaptation as conscious repetition but importantly not recreation so that a new narrative can be encountered (7). Bachelder looks back on a personally unexperienced yet impactful past, a distinct difference from Dos Passos' "Camera Eye" in *The 42nd Parallel*. But interestingly, the section also adapts itself within the novel's pages for greater effect.

As the section explains, the narrator's sister and young friend are growing up in the United States – in the U.S.A. in other words – with particular protections accessible to them:

> this is america with white children playing safely in the frontyard they don't need to wear shoes even and the thing is is that the children hold signs in the air they are picket signs signs of protest little white posterboard signs maskingtape to sticks these white children protesting something in the suburban frontyard on a rainy day but you can't see the front of their signs because the photographer who is my father is behind the children and you want to see (194)

Decades later, when the narrator asks about those signs in the discovered photograph, his father claims that the signs were blank because protesting was just a game then, just like "war" becomes a remembered game from the narrator's own childhood one decade later as a childish recreation of the Vietnam War. The section then ends with the young narrator and his sister's debate over successful death during their game: "I shot you no you didn't you missed no I got you you're dead" (195). These children obviously do not understand the social situations that they are recreating, or adapting, as they imagine a moment full of political tension without any context or understanding. This moment is not didactic in its intent. It is a contrast between American history as "facts" and a

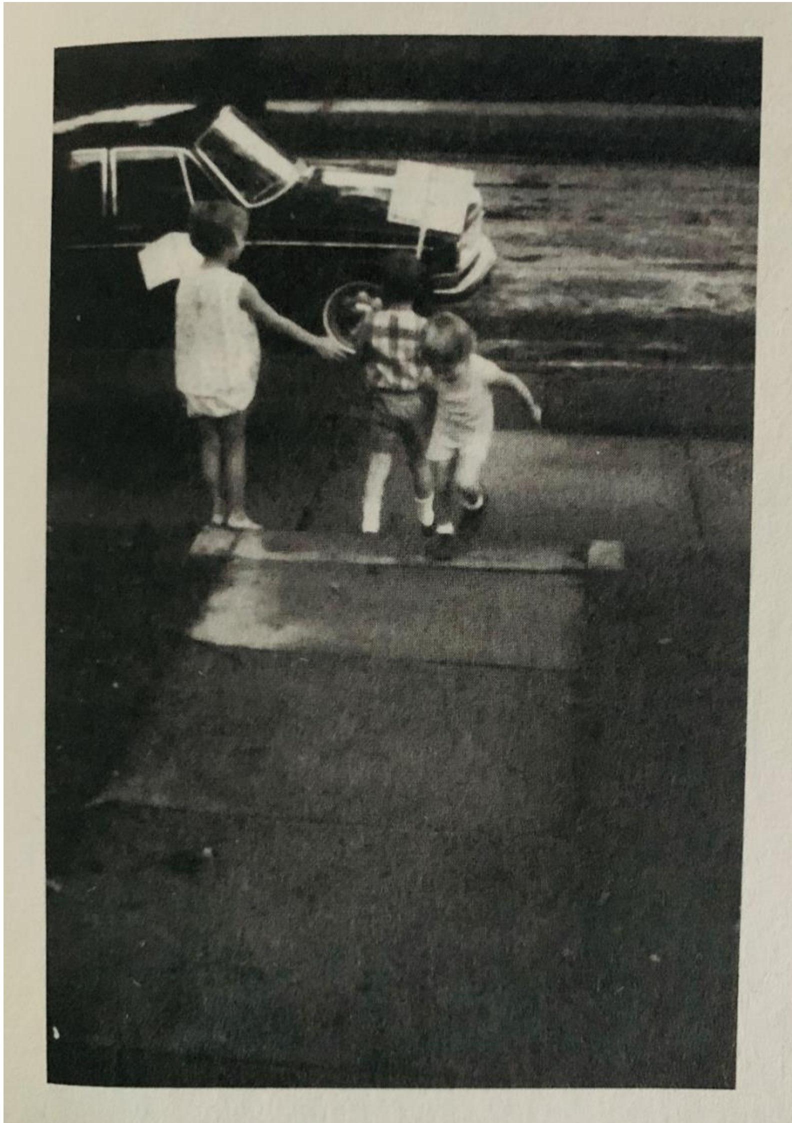

Figure Three: The photograph referenced in *U.S.!*'s "The Camera Eye" section is included after the written content. It shows three children pretending to protest with signs, with one child identified as the narrator's sister Lisa. Unlike Dos Passos' "Camera Eye" sections, which emulated an unedited scene in a film, this section instead connects to a still photograph in order to consider memories about a single moment in time (Bachelder, *U.S.!* 195).

fictionalized version, with that fiction emptied as innocent play. It is a protest without words, a war without death. These major upheavals in the United States are represented as farcical play because the remaining image has no specific protest to communicate, just like a finally deceased Sinclair lying in his casket can no longer speak. At this first glance, Bachelder's "The Camera Eye" adaptation appears to impart a similar message to the rest of his novel. But what does such a lack of content on the signs taped together by naïve children imply for a 21st century reader? What is the desire communicated by the narrator? Primarily, it creates an

argument to look back and discover those missing words – or even create a space where those words can be imagined by a contemporaneous audience in a new century. And the inclusion of a photograph, a genre adaptation of the written "The Camera Eye" section, allows for just such a malleable conception. Direct didacticism has a place here, and an adaptation can allow space for its inclusion in a text.

Unlike the "Camera Eye" sections in Dos Passos' work, which do not have any illustrations even as the writing recalls the aesthetics of film – and even as the character sections are consistently paired with hand-drawn sketches by artist Reginald Marsh in many editions – *U.S.!*'s "The Camera Eye" section adapts the format by including a still photograph as the final element for its "The Camera Eye" section. Bachelder's writing describes a desire by the narrator to know what the young children's protest signs say, even decades later. The narrator hopes to discover content even wrapped in a certain kind of childlike, barefoot safety, a meaning for a protest written out in words on white signs created by invested individuals. And even as his father tells him that the signs were blank, and even as that blankness implies a nihilistic emptiness to political writings in the United States once again, the adaptive capacity for meaning remains – a potential for creative rewritings of this moment realized even more because of the included image in the section (see figure three). This image does emphasize the whiteness of the children, primarily because the children's clothing and signs contrast with the dark street and the car behind them; this purity can read as innocence or ignorance to protests during the Civil Rights Movement once consciously paired with the written text. But just as importantly, this one photograph, the only one included in the entirety of *U.S.!*, halts the flow of the text and its current stream of consciousness style. It does so to introduce a

new text, an adaptation of the previous written content, which can be read as full of unrealized meaning. As a "parenthetical notation" to the novel's discussion of the political novel, it returns to the imagined potential for words on a sign because the signs can again be assumed to have content on the opposite side. This capacity proposes hidden claims as communicated and recognized. The photograph does not have to mean what the father claims or what the narrator assumes as truth. "Facts" do not have to be the only form of meaning because adaptation allows for rewriting. And once the new potential emerges, such adaptive content can allow for a new narrative with a revised meaning for its audience. The space for didacticism exists via a rewriting of a past narrative - with a new meaning as a possible path toward future contexts instead of a persistent narrative detailing either failures or missed opportunities from a past. The signs are a locus for advocacy based in that past but understood by narratives for the present moment. They can be rewritten and remade for a 21st century American public.

Bachelder's novel, as mentioned, returns from "The Camera Eye" to a narrative focus on the fictional undead Upton Sinclair, an extended section that includes Sinclair's newest publication *A Moveable Jungle!*, a small town book burning celebration, and yet another assassination attempt or two on the resurrected muckraker (208, 249, 297). Even as Sinclair survives for once, the novel ends with a disliked Sinclair fleeing from his fellow Americans, his novel read by one young boy but still rejected by the majority of the public.[52] Such an ending implies a return to the death of the novel, the didactic

[52] Importantly for the plot of the novel, Sinclair's illegitimate son Albert also dies during this scene, a serious blow to Sinclair personally that leaves him "devastated" (Bachelder, *U.S.!* 293). Sinclair has a telepathic connection with his son during his last moments, a plot point derived primarily from Sinclair's wife Mary Craig and her interest in mental telepathy (Coodley 105). Sinclair's distance from his son Albert also appears to be a

political novel in particular, with Sinclair as the symbol for impossibility of leftist narratives in the 21st century. But *U.S.!* as a case study illuminates the tensions between didactic writing and literary narratives in American political fiction while also demonstrating the capability for adaptive texts to reassert didactic approaches via a return to the writing styles of the early 20th century. As the single image in "The Camera Eye" section demonstrates, a didactic approach can be imagined once again. Within Bachelder's satirical novel, literary rebellion emerges from an outdated past *and also* can become a continued presence as long as adaptation occurs.

Doctorow wondered at the impact of writers withdrawing from explicit political fiction during the late 20th century, a disengagement that left American writers "in a kind of stunned submission to the political circumstances of [American's] lives and the establishment rule of [American] politicians" ("The Belief" 115). Accordingly, Doctorow wrote that an "appropriate" response to the political situation would most likely be "books of a grubbier, sloppier, and more energetic sort" with "less polish and self-consciousness" to better reflect social needs (116). In 1997, David Foster Wallace similarly questioned the path forward for literature, in particular because postmodern irony has erroneously assumed "a revelation of imprisonment led to freedom" (67). He instead wondered if the next generation of writers would be "anti-rebels," a return to sincere conviction in literature:

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rewriting of his sporadically tense relationship with his actual son David, a distance created by Craig most likely because she did not like Sinclair's first wife Meta (Arthur 201-2).

> The next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti*-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. […] These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. *Dead on the page.* Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point. Maybe that's why they'll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. (81, emphasis added)

Bachelder may believe that 21st century American audiences disregard sincere writing in the vein of Upton Sinclair within such a "skeptical [21st century] climate" because of its "epistemic swagger – its presumption to know" an answer for the country (Bachelder, "*The Jungle* at 100"). If a contemporary writer did try to emulate the didactic approach of the infamous muckraker from this perspective, that work would be "dead on the page" – writing viewed as quaint in its attempts, idealistic in its morals, and outdated in its style. But such a rebellious nature only remains out of date if it is not allowed to adapt and risk some disapproval. Like Doctorow and Wallace predicted, literary anti-rebels have returned, armed with sincere political concerns and a didactic approach to American political fiction. And as the next chapter begins to consider, the 2010s become a decade for decidedly rebellious literature.

CHAPTER TWO

UNSEIZED PAST, INSPIRATIONAL FUTURE: THE POLITICAL POSSIBILITIES OF ADAPTING JACK LONDON'S *THE IRON HEEL*

As Edward Bellamy's political novel *Looking Backward* comes to an end, protagonist Julian West seems to make a terrible discovery: he has not, in fact, slept for a century and awoken in a progressive utopia but instead has had a rather intense dream due to hypnosis. Julian's future experiences have changed his perspective on social inequality in the United States. With no feasible method of return, he reacts with a plea for radical change to his fellow wealthy elites. He runs through the streets of 19th century Boston in despair at its evidence of class division and poverty, eventually to arrive at the home of his affluent fiancée. As he bursts into the dining room, one filled with wealthy Americans, he attempts to persuade them to his vision of the future: "With fervency I spoke of that new world, blessed with plenty, purified by justice and sweetened by brotherly kindness, the world of which I had indeed but dreamed, but which might so easily be made real. But when I had expected now surely the faces around me to light up with emotions akin to mine, they grew even more dark, angry, and scornful" (217). Julian does not remain discouraged by his associates' disregard for long, however. He awakens yet again, this time back in that enlightened 21st century. He does not have to fight during his original time because the utopia materializes before his eyes. The previous historical moment only exists for Julian as a terrible, inequitable nightmare, but his future remains a

beacon for equity, compassion, and social justice. Julian feels content in a stable civilization. He can live within his dream society simply by opening his eyes.

Bellamy's argument here is outright utopian in nature, and it uses a projected future as a tool for exploring political change, a message especially potent in late 19th-century America.[53] The core idea of utopia is represented in the work: the "desire for being otherwise," to find a "better way of being or of living" because a particular community "[refuses] to accept that what is given is enough" (Levitas xii, 5, 17). Utopian thought embraces the need to find alternatives from present conditions – "not to blandly escape the present but to move thinking beyond the limits dominant culture commonly sets" (Ventura). *Looking Backward* as a novel does not "look back" on the realities of 19th century American capitalism as a dominant cultural force with any fondness. It instead uplifts an imagined future with all its potential as a utopia both economically and socially, even as simultaneously the novel sidesteps most discussions on race and gender in the midst of appeals for equity.[54] In other words, Bellamy challenges the contemporaneous system by attempting to imagine utopia with all socio-economic needs met for (supposedly) all citizens, a method of utopian literature like many others written during the period from the 1870s to the end of the World War I that

[53] As mentioned in this project's first chapter, the most popular books in 19th century America were *Uncle Tom's Cabin, A Tale of Two Cities, Ben-Hur,* and *Looking Backward*, all with overt social commentary (McIntosh 19).

[54] As an important note, Bellamy does not purely ignore race so much as he sidesteps any true engagement with racism, segregation, and associated cultural impacts. As Patricia Ventura notes, the exclusion of race within any American utopia would create a "radically different" society, and minority writers have recognized such problematic conceptions throughout the 20th century; however, Bellamy's white-centric text embraces privilege over a post-racial world. This distinction is valuable to the overall framing of Bellamy's work, especially in light of its popularity in the late 19th century as well as its precursor status to London's *The Iron Heel.*

critiques a society's present system and its "substantive irrationalities" (74-5). Bellamy's work is therefore emblematic – and even inspirational – for utopian American literature at the time of its publication. The novel primarily focuses on potential solutions, similar to most utopian fiction, and falls into over-simplification rather than political or historical complexity (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 12).[55] The answer for Bellamy can be found in his novel's conception of a progressive future, a position situated less by accuracy and more by the author's ideology and class-perspective (172, 175).[56] Yet Bellamy's protagonist gains life within utopian society through passive acts: Julian sleeps his way into a realized socialist utopia, with his greatest trauma only existing as a brief, nightmarish return to the late 19th century at the novel's conclusion. Instead of returning to an American past in order to struggle for a better future, Julian reawakens within a seemingly perfected society already established for all citizens. He does not participate in actions for radical change or gatherings for social revolution because he does not need to do so. He already has reached his desired utopia without any further action needed.

Such a narrative structure for didactic political literature – as well as literature more generally associated with utopian ideals – often centralizes the results of utopic

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[55] Jameson further details the issues of representation due to such limitations: "Yet in order for representability to be achieved, the social or historical moment must somehow offer itself as a situation, allow itself to be read in terms of effects and causes, or problems and solutions, questions and answers. […] The social totality is always unrepresentable, even for the most numerically limited groups of people; but it can sometimes be mapped and allow a small-scale model to be constructed on which the fundamental tendencies and the lines of flight can more clearly be read. At other times, this representational process is impossible, and people face history and the social totality as a bewildering chaos, whose forces are indiscernible" (*Archaeologies* 13-4).

[56] To clarify, 19th century class structures were much more rigid than 21st class structures (Jameson, "Introduction" 365), and the 2016 adaptation of *The Iron Heel* does take a more intersectional approach to American society than London's original novel.

change far more than any struggle to materialize an equitable future. Protagonists can wake in futuristic societies or discover hidden nations as a realized space for particular political ideals. But not all literary utopias ignore the requisite political fight in order to create such a society, and one prominent writer engaging in such rebellious literary work was Jack London. Although London admired Bellamy for his success and overall vision – alongside his personal desire to receive parallel "popularity" for his own socialist fiction (Tichi, Introduction, Stein 79)[57] – London's rendition of utopian literature had a much more aggressive approach than Bellamy's conventional one. Instead of a Bellamy-like reassurance of eventual goodwill and justice, or a potentially "comfortable book" about an immediate "moral awakening," London's novel *The Iron Heel* does not avoid the violent political struggle and social disruption most likely required for any serious political upheaval (Stein 81).[58] *The Iron Heel* as a socialist utopia "could not afford to be a blueprint" in the vein of *Looking Backward* because London recognized the powerful capitalist structures against American socialism in the early 20th century. A written guide

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[57] Stein cites a letter from London to George P. Brett, President of the MacMillan Company on November 21, 1902, about his future writing projects: "I have three books which I should like to write as soon as I can get at them. The third book, with which I shall bid for a popularity as Bellamy received, (yet a quite different popularity), I shall write last, in the meantime preparing for it while I write the other two" (qtd. in Stein 79).
[58] As a note, Tichi details London's 1910 short story "Goliah" as the writer's closest response to Bellamy's *Looking Backward:* "Set in 1924, 'Goliah' lays bare the dark grip of the Big Business oligarchy as pitted against an enlightened potentate Goliah (a Goliath), the agent of revolutionary progress. The Golden Rule of the story is the pursuit of earthly happiness, for Goliah decrees that 'laughter' must supplant the industrial age 'slaughter' by warmongering corporate chieftains and their political minions. […] Social reform in 'Goliah' is swift and immediate. […] 'Goliah' was London's fictional prospectus for the social legislation enacted in the 1930s United States" (Afterward). However, although this text may be a more direct parallel, I focus here on the contrast between *The Iron Heel*'s call for direct political action compared to *Looking Backward's* desire for realized utopia.

for social structures was not considered enough by London to encourage action from the working class in his contemporaneous present. Simultaneously, however, "[the novel] could not help being a utopia" in its narrative structure and desired results. Due to this contrast, London uniquely demonstrates that early 20th century utopian narratives did not have to be static, closed systems but could instead be "emphatically open" with a vision for the transition from America's contemporaneous present to imagined political contexts of the future (Khouri 174-5).

As a pertinent progression of that approach in the 21st century, Edward Einhorn's 2016 dramatic adaptation of *The Iron Heel* also does not have a static, closed utopian representation. In fact, the play expands even further. Einhorn's *The Iron Heel* has its utopian future engage in a dynamic relationship with an American past as well, a distinct adaptive change from the original novel, with that past represented as the early 20th century setting of London's original work. This didactic and rebellious approach – one instigated by London's novel and extended by Einhorn's adaptation – does not allow utopian narratives to stagnate or settle into potential outlines for social alterations; it does not encourage history as simply a series of facts left behind. The 2016 play rather invites consideration of political possibilities from an America past as redemption for an America future: possibilities previously unfulfilled yet still achievable through, in the case of this particular text, the desire for utopia. Adaptation becomes the vehicle for such potential redemption in regard to unfulfilled leftist goals and narratives, with Einhorn's rewriting of London's novel functioning as an ideal example.

These didactic political works seek a deliberate transformation of American social and political structures, an appeal not just for imagination but also realization. A

paramount risk of utopia as a literary form, as a particular form of didactic political literature in the vein of *Looking Backward*, resides in its limitations as a method of social reform, as often "a vehicle only of critique rather than of transformation" (Levitas 103). London's *The Iron Heel* attempts to avoid this concern by focusing on the revolutionary early 20th century characters for its primary narrative. While this writing decision emphasizes the distinction between acceptable utopic dreams and dangerous subversive action, London's approach conceives of only an imminent 20th century future – the socialist protest within that current American system – and a distant 27th century future – a realized utopian society – as inspiration for his present readers. Because the novel has so much focus on different points in America's projected future, little consideration remains for a more complex relationship with an American past: not just a fear of it (as intimated in Bellamy's work) but any desire to realize its unrecognized potential. It may not be possible to wake up in a realized utopian future, as London asserts, but imagining need not persist only as the realm of a future projection as London considered in his fictional work. Einhorn's text imagines a valuable past in addition to a utopian future, and his play speaks to his contemporaneous audience's experiences as well. In other words, it is possible to fight in the present for an ideal society by *taking advantage of the lessons from an American past in order to imagine an equitable future.* Such work can be continued through the process of literary adaptation of early 20th century texts for the 21st century, and Einhorn's 2016 adaptation of *The Iron Heel* engages in just such a premise.

By adapting London's aggressive approach to protest literature in his theatrical version of *The Iron Heel,* Einhorn recreates a conversation about utopian inspiration for present action; yet simultaneously, Einhorn also allows an American past to become

inspirational instead of despaired. Unlike Bachelder's previously considered political novel *U.S.!* – a novel that engages in discussions of a constantly failing political novel even as it truly demonstrates the potential of 21st century political adaptation in American literature – Einhorn's play embraces the potential within previous didactic political narratives without reservation. *The Iron Heel* adaptation engages with America's past as incomplete instead of a failure; the play simultaneously envisions an altered, perfected future, a utopic time still invested in the rebellious efforts of its previous citizenry. In essence, such didactic political adaptations can redeem that which was previously considered failure in leftist American history, and Einhorn's play engages in just such a project via its engagement with past protest literature from the perspective of a futuristic setting for its 21st century audience.

Einhorn's adaptation of *The Iron Heel* seeks to emphasize the general need for contemporaneous revolutionary action as it decreases any separation between narratives via a timeline shift.[59] In the 2016 drama, recognized history is not a horror to sleep away or a potential future to imagine beyond a not-yet-perfected present. Einhorn's play instead demonstrates the power of a didactic political adaptation that engages with past political possibilities in relation to a still-viable future – a dynamic not grounded ultimately in America's previous political actions as failures but alternatively as unrealized action still recoverable through socio-political communication. For these

[59] Einhorn's play premiered on July 23rd, 2016, and it played until September 5th in New York City. It was produced at the following venues during that time: Freedom Socialist Party, Freedom Hall; Governor's Island, House 8B (the Dysfunctional Collective); Jackie Robinson Park; Judson Memorial Church; South Oxford Space; and the West Side Community Garden (Einhorn, *Iron* 14). Performances were either free or pay-what-you-can for entrance (Weber).

reasons, although London wrote to inspire political action by crafting a realized utopian future for his readers, Einhorn alters the work significantly through the process of adaptation because he creates a utopian future while his focus primarily remains with those possibilities provided by an American past. As Zygmunt Bauman argues, the future theoretically should be the "realm of freedom" because it is unrealized and distinct from a crafted, decided past. The concept of history is often perceived so that "[t]he future is in principle pliable – the past is solid, sturdy, and fixed once and for all," with such a perception previously holding for the likes of Bellamy and London; however, a reconceived past is actually a locus "[susceptible] to moulding and remoulding" as narratives "perpetually reenact creation" (61-2) in order to imagine missed possibilities. This reenactment occurs in 2016's *The Iron Heel* via adaptational changes, with rewritings as potential for redemption. Within this frame, the utopian future and its projected leftist society remain stable goals for audience members in Einhorn's present, functioning in a similar fashion to London's novel, while a rewritten American past from the early 20th century (and not its near future as previously framed by London) becomes moldable and inspirational for Einhorn's intended 21st century audience. By actively shaping the United States' political past from a distant future perspective, the 2016 drama engenders even greater opportunity for leftist political action as a piece of didactic political literature, in particular through discussions between his adapted characters for the stage. Einhorn's play therefore presents literary inspiration combined with unseized possibility within 21st century didactic protest literature in the United States due to a sincere leftist desire for redemption rather than failure in the coming days.

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Although London's works such as *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* are still well known in the American canon, his socialist writings are far less immediately recognizable in the 21st century. With this discrepancy in mind, a review of London's *The Iron Heel* as well as context on Einhorn's adaptation must first be considered, as London's political writings have been either excluded from or reconfigured within the American literary canon. Although the novel is framed by its imagined future, London's *The Iron Heel* does not primarily focus on the projected utopian society. Instead, the brutal dystopian fight for such a utopian dream within the contemporaneous near-future is the primary narrative. *The Iron Heel* portrays a vicious political battle in the early 20th century, with a secondary narrative conveyed via footnotes in the imagined 27th century's utopian future. Presented as a found manuscript, London's novel is framed by the two different time periods: as a personal journal from Avis Everhard, the devoted wife of socialist revolutionary Ernest Everhard at the start of the 20th century,[60] and as a historical document annotated by historian Anthony Meredith over seven centuries later.[61] This construction is almost a reverse of the infamous conference presentation reveal from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale:* London's readers are told upfront in a fictional foreword that the "Everhard Manuscript" is a distinct historical document, one full of "the bias of love" because it is written by the devoted wife of just one socialist leader at the time (xi). The point of this fictional study is not historical fact or direct

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[60] As a figure, London perceived Ernest Everhard's politics and political actions to reflect both himself and Eugene Debs (Foner 89).

[61] Although most scholarship refers to Anthony Meredith as Meredith, I will consistently name him as Anthony. This decision distinguishes London's historian character in the novel with Einhorn's adapted version of the character named Antonia Meredith in his play. Anthony Meredith is therefore referred to as Anthony in this chapter, while Antonia Meredith is referred to as Antonia.

revelation to their society, as Anthony outlines for the reader, for the 20th century struggle against the capitalist "Oligarchy" does not immediately lead to utopian fulfillment. Yet it does lay the groundwork for rebellion and eventual success, and the emotional "sympathetic comprehension" unveiled by their rebellious struggles are powerful in the face of such a devastating force like capitalism (xii-xiv). Avis' writings then proceed, a journal covering her initial discovery of her husband Ernest as a socialist to her eventual devotion toward him and his class-conscious perspective. Ernest rallies against businessmen with "hearts [as hard as the] heels with which [they] tread upon the face of the poor," and he claims, if the capitalist system maintains the power of production, that "labor […] will be crushed under the iron heel of a despotism as relentless and terrible as any despotism that has blackened the pages of the history of man. That will be a good name for that despotism, the Iron Heel" (81, 125). Although he initially intends to spread socialism at the ballot box by running for Congress, Ernest eventually puts his faith in revolution as the capitalists continue to gain power (143); however, lost battles, in particular a final bloody stand in Chicago, eventually lead to the abrupt ending of the journal entries. Anthony's footnotes explain that Ernest and Avis were most likely executed by the forces of the Oligarchs, with three centuries of oppressive control following before the historian's utopia would come to be (288, xv). This distinction between the early 20th century and the 27th century allows for a powerful discussion; unlike Bellamy's disparate projection, the structure of London's *The Iron Heel* engenders engagement with a past that becomes inspirational instead of disowned. Therefore, even as it envisions a perfected distant future, the novel argues strongly for contemporaneous

action against American capitalism's overwhelming power.[62] Additionally, London viewed socialism as an active process, not a fantasy to imagine for future generations, and he used his skill as a writer to stoke sentiment toward public action at the turn of the century. As he wrote in 1899, "the time for Utopias and dreamers is past," with London even rejecting the label of "utopian" despite his novel imagining such a potential future (qtd. in Tichi, Chapter 2). But he was focused intensely on the possibility for social change, in particular economic justice for working class citizens via achievable socialist efforts. *The Iron Heel* demanded such engagement and acknowledgement from its readers as well.

Utopian literature can be limited, as London insinuates, especially when it seeks to show ultimate social goals rather than current political actions and realities. Both London and Einhorn recognize this perspective in their contemporaneous political realities, although only Einhorn extends this consideration specifically to an American past. A dramatic recreation of the narrative, Einhorn's *The Iron Heel* has 27th century utopian citizens act out the revolutionary lives of socialist activists such as Ernest and Avis from the early 20th century, with great distinction placed on the sacrifices made by those long-dead socialists on the path toward a bettered society. Through interrogating a

[62] Vitally, London's work does have dystopian elements within the primary narrative, as the so-called "Iron Heel" capitalist class succeeds for a time. However, this narrative is constantly balanced by the footnotes and their utopian perspective/reality. London therefore does not only portray an impossible future or an imminent potential totalitarian government, as many dystopian narratives ultimately reveal (Levitas xiii). Instead, London's work includes elements of science fiction, dystopian fiction, adventure fiction, romance fiction, melodrama, and socialist propaganda. The narrative may not "go well" for the 20th century characters, but the hopeful future is a key component to the narrative's construction (Mandell). In other words, the utopian future is meant to validate the struggle in the dystopian present and near-future.

politically charged present via an understanding of an American past, this 21st century political adaptation creates meaningful commentary on both a rewritten concept of American politics as well as a reimagined American future. Einhorn's adaptation significantly rewrites the original text by setting the primary action in the future, with his characters already living in a realized utopia. Because the audience must then consider the early 20th century past alongside the distant 27th century future, they alternatively can reimagine a revolutionary past while also projecting into a fully realized utopian society. This altered structure shifts the narrative's core socialist message as a didactic political work because it reconstructs the play's intent for a 21st century audience with 21st political concerns – now a narrative centered between a radical past and a projected future. Einhorn's particular framing for his adaptation is the most significant adaptive shift within the play, a work set in a realized, stable utopia which focuses on the turn of the last century as incentive when compared to London's novel as a near future uprising with utopian commentary as footnotes. As the print version of Einhorn's *The Iron Heel* recognizes in its "Time and Place" section, London's work was considered "pure science fiction at the time *The Iron Heel* [novel] was originally written" with its near- and distant-future settings (17). Yet Einhorn's adaptation stretches both backward and forward in time for its contemporary audience. This setting decision is substantial from the playwright's perspective because he emphasizes a parallel between the early 20th century and the early 21st century, with results in the play acting as a general call for direct action in the 2010s in light of both a recognizable past and a galvanizing future.

The dramatic adaptation of *The Iron Heel* was performed Off-Off-Broadway during the late summer of 2016, amidst the political tensions of a contentious presidential

race as well as the recent revitalization of leftist political thought due to democratic-socialist Senator Bernie Sanders' presidential run (Vincentelli, Mandell).[63] The play was produced by the New York-based independent theater company Untitled Theater Company #61, at which Einhorn is the Artistic Director (Einhorn, "Edward").[64] Performances took place in "unconventional spaces" with actors in direct contact with the audience, and viewers were welcomed with free drinks and a booklet of protest song lyrics (Mandell, Weber); this format invited audience ease and participation. The play additionally engaged audience members to interact with the overt political commentary by simulating political action as if all participants were actually out in the streets. During live productions, for example, the actors would encourage the audience to sing along to the adapted protest songs and wave flags as fellow "comrades" to recreate protest acts (Edward). Actors and audience members alike would then sing music together, such as the famous 20th century protest song "Which Side Are You On?" (Einhorn, *The Iron* 72-3). The performance setting created situations that required audience interaction within the physical performance space, all the more emphasized by the future utopian citizenry's engagement with a fictionalized revolutionary past. The adapted songs did not simply remain as previous versions and speak to those times. The songs were rewritten for the

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[63] Additionally, the play has been recorded and distributed via PodBean as a three-part audio drama in 2021 (Einhorn, *The Iron Heel Audio*).
[64] Untitled Theater Company #61 often produces adaptations for the stage, with political content as a particular focus. The theater company is described as the following: "Untitled Theater Company #61 (UTC#61), a Theater of Ideas: scientific, political, philosophical, and above all theatrical. Untitled Theater No. 61 has been presenting theater in New York for over 20 years, and has received Critics Picks from *The New York Times, Time Out New York,* and *The Village Voice*" (BWW News Desk).

present, and the performances consequently intended for audience members to recognize their present reality via these particular songs.

Einhorn as a playwright creates explicitly for a contemporaneous audience with particular social concerns in mind. His works often engage with both politics and adaptation, such as his 2017 play *The Marriage of Alice B. Toklas by Gertrude Stein* and his 2020 play *Doctors Jane and Alexander*.[65] According to reviews for *The Iron Heel* specifically, Einhorn showcases his ability to "[turn] intellectual matters into engaging stage shows" with the original narrative's plot in mind, crafting "a flawed but refreshingly unironic play" with "heart-on-sleeve warmth" (Mandell, Vincentelli). This approach, an "anti-rebel" style to adaptation that echoes the premise discussed in the previous chapter for 21st century didactic political literature,[66] encourages genuine political engagement from audience members. In his "Adaptor's Notes," Einhorn discusses his inspiration for such a setting in light of playwright Bertolt Brecht, as he intends to "outrage the audience" in a similar manner to Brecht's political works by displaying "the consequences of unvarnished Capitalism" (*The Iron* 11). Reviewers also associated Einhorn's work with Brecht because the play includes interjections from performers, live music, and sing-along content (Vincentelli, Bailey); yet Einhorn more importantly follows Brecht's argument about literature not as preoccupied with timeless

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[65] *The Marriage of Alice B. Toklas by Gertrude Stein* adapts elements from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Although the play imitates Stein's unique writing style for dialogue, significant changes include a wedding between Stein and Toklas which is officiated by Carl Van Vechten (Green). *Doctors Jane and Alexander* recreates "real-life testimony" from Einhorn's family history; the play also includes Einhorn himself and his family members as fictionalized characters (Phillips).
[66] This "anti-rebel" concept comes from David Foster Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." For further analysis, please see the end of the first chapter.

"endurance" but instead engagement with a creator's own historical moment (Brecht 76). Brecht believed that a writer must speak the people's language for the people's benefit; the "ruling classes use lies," and therefore "to tell the truth is clearly an ever more urgent task" (80): "If we wish to have a living and combative literature, which is fully engaged with reality and fully grasps reality, a truly popular literature, we must keep step with the rapid development of reality" (85).[67] Einhorn views his adaptation of *The Iron Heel* as combatively engaging in the current American reality of socio-economic disparity, "a show whose naked purpose is to examine political issues, couching them in a story" (*The Iron* 12). As a minor example of such rewriting, Einhorn's utopian characters reference a "Revolt of 2016" as inspiration for the eventual revolution that leads to their utopian society (23); the date of performance in this regard becomes a starting point for political action within the fictional narrative itself, a call directly to his audience for general protest and commentary. With such additions, Einhorn's narrative explicates the overwhelming power of capital and business in 2010s American culture, and he rewrites London's novel in order to showcase how the United States' present social reality parallels the Progressive Era's intense economic inequality. But still the question remains: what happens when a playwright so concerned with the contemporaneous

[67] Brecht elaborates on this literary need by advocating for popular writing and realistic writing, and he creates specific definitions for these categories. Popular writing represents the most progressive groups of people in that particular historical moment, because "what was popular yesterday is not today, for the people today are not what they were yesterday" (83). Popular writing should impact society and history, should "determine its direction" (81). Likewise, realistic writing changes as well, with a charge for socio-political impact. Realistic writing should be a means for "unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power," emphasizing change and development (82). With both popular and realistic works, however, the goal remains engagement for such literature.

moment sets his work somehow both 100 years in the past and hundreds of years in the future? For that context, an adapted past must be contextualized first so that any changes from previously conceived failure can be understood; such an adaptive work can then create a powerful space for an inspirational future.

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For his adaptation based in both a rewritten past and an inspirational future, Einhorn is not only influenced by a singular text from Jack London but also London's often unexplored identity as a socialist American writer. London's reach for a future goal set the stage in regard to a different framing for an adaptation in the 2010s, a significant alteration when compared to many other literary works engaging in utopian conceptions. His particular brand of socialism emphatically did not address the practicalities of socialist governance along the lines of Bellamy but did focus on brotherhood, comradeship, and class solidarity; his ideas "[contained] the kind of optimism that any resurgent socialism movement would have to borrow and recycle" (Raskin 6). His novel, which has become a historical object for 21st century citizenry about a prior unrealized possibility from an American past, is only part of that recycling effort. Even as the time for his projected utopia has not been met, his previous calls for leftist action represent a missed opportunity itself. And while adaptations do not require prior knowledge of original content for a viewing audience, Einhorn's literary and political goals for the 2016 play illuminate the shift from a future revolution toward a utopian society alone to instead an inspirational narrative sought in response to an American past's previously unrealized possibilities – a position best understood once the context of both literary works are grounded in their declared goals and perspectives.

During his most active years with the American socialist movement at the turn of the century, London used his pen as a force for the working class. Now more famous in American literature as a writer about individualism and rugged masculinity,[68] London was unique as a writer because he was a critical and financial success actually read by the contemporaneous working class while writing about the working class's struggles against oppression (Foner v, 7). London garnered both popular and literary fame, a rare status in American literature, and his readership was both national and international during his lifetime (Berliner 71). His cultural legacy continues to this day through his "remarkable adaptability," a personal brand that developed him into a "mythic figure, a ready-made cultural icon through whom to create a new narrative of bravery and endeavor" in the American imagination via fictional cameos and adaptations of his various fictional texts (Bembridge 70-75, 86). London is perceived as a known entity from the American literary canon, a recognizable name associated with particular masculine values.[69]

Yet London was a strong voice for socialist politics, even if he is less remembered for those ideas in contemporaneous American popular imagination. London did not only

[68] London's national reputation has become the individual against the natural world in the 21st century, although his international representation – particularly in Russia – remains linked to his identity as a radical socialist. This contrast reflects the American emphasis on individualism as well as the American rejection of socialism over the last century (Campbell Reesman 8). As Foner noted in the mid-20th century, "All over Europe and Asia and in outlying parts of the world, thousands of copies of these works still circulate annually and continue to stimulate progressive thinking and to inspire social and political reforms. Yet in his own country the social writings of Jack London have been permitted to lie buried" (v).

[69] As recognized in the introduction, it is important to note here that London did not believe in equality of the races, and his writings often reflected his white supremacy (Raskin 35). His socialist beliefs therefore conflicted directly with his racist beliefs (Campbell Reesman 7, 34). For further discussion on London and racism, please see the introduction discussion on Joyce Carol Oates' *The Accursed*.

see a need for an end to poverty, labor abuse, and disease; he called for "the destruction of the system which was responsible for these evils" by bringing attention to the socialist movement through his fictional writings (Foner 8, 52). From London's perspective, a struggle between the classes, between labor and capital, was inevitable: "It is no longer a question of whether or not there is a class struggle. The question now is, what will be the outcome of the class struggle?" ("The Class Struggle," 129, 136) London's personal experience with poverty inspired his socialist politics, with socialism "hammered" into him after struggles as a "faithful [..] wage slave" exploited by capitalism ("How" 181-2). London believed no one should struggle in a country with immense wealth available, and he sought to incite "outrage against the dominant and brutal economics regime" in order to create "a better era for the future" (Tichi, Chapter 2).

In his nonfiction work *War of the Classes,* for example, London denounced the "capitalist class" for decrying leftist politics – specifically socialism for London in 1905[70] – not only as "Utopian and impossible" but also as dangerous for American society:

> Only dangerous things are abhorrent [to the capitalist class]. The thing that is not dangerous is always respectable. And so with socialism in the United States. For several years it had been very respectable, - a sweet and beautiful Utopian dream, in the bourgeois mind, yet a dream, only a dream. During this period, which has just ended, socialism was tolerated because it was impossible and non-menacing. Much of its thunder had been stolen, and the workingman had been made happy with full dinner-pails. […] Socialism had shown that it was a very live and growing revolutionary force, and all its old menace revived. I am afraid that neither it nor I are any longer respectable. (Preface 124-5)

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[70] London was most active as a socialist from 1905-1907, during which time he lectured to socialist organizations, raised money for socialist causes, wrote many nonfiction essays about the dangers of American capitalism, worked with the Intercollegiate Socialist Society with Upton Sinclair, and wrote his novel *The Iron Heel* (Foner 63). He did eventually resign from the socialist party toward the end of his life in 1916 (123). For more about his work with Sinclair, as well as London's identity connected to his brand of socialism (Auerbach 133), please again see the introduction discussion on Oates' *The Accursed*.

Leftist, utopian political thought, in other words, is acceptable to the powerful capitalists in the United States as projected speculation – a dream imagined by the likes of Bellamy in a distant fictional narrative, a dream that can no longer be "respectable" or acceptable once action is attempted to meet social needs for impoverished American citizens. Political discussion or imagination is permissible but calls for direct political action are dangerous and therefore "abhorrent." For London, the average member of the capitalist class believed revolutionary change in the vein of socialist reform remained "Utopian and impossible" for good reason (125). There is a safety in limitations and a menace in revolutionary force. Thus, didactic literature results in a loss of respectability. As London claimed in the early 20th century, utopia as political desire – as a dream – could be tolerated. Projected leftist actions are another concept altogether, and so he placed such ideas alongside an imagined, politicized future within his outspoken novel *The Iron Heel.*

Socialism is a theme present in most of London's works, as Jonathan Berliner argues, even if the political ideology is less obvious in some fictional texts: "While London's characters are not usually socialists per se, their actions and the themes of the works they inhabit are often compatible with both the socialism London professed in his nonfiction works" (54).[71] Cecelia Tichi overall echoes this sentiment in her book *Jack London: A Writer's Fight for a Better America*, with the additional point that London could use fiction as political messaging in a manner that he could not with his nonfiction essays. London's fiction "could cloak his reproaches and admonition" toward the wealthy elite, such as with his descriptions of a "work beast" in *Call of the Wild*. Because fiction

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[71] Berliner here also connects London's fiction to Soviet ideologies, as a reason why London has remained popular in Russia for over a century (54).

could allow readers to focus on entertainment value over political messaging, Tichi argues, London's social reform messaging could pass within his fiction and engage "reservoirs of public empathy that London knew to be foundational for social change" (Chapter 4). Yet notably, London does not use socialism as a theme alone in *The Iron Heel* but rather the primary focus.

The Iron Heel is a didactic political American novel, one written by London not just as political speech but inspiration toward revolutionary action (Whalen-Bridge 73). While the novel could be read as a personal statement about socialism, *The Iron Heel* is also, as John Whalen-Bridge argues, "propaganda in support of the proletarian revolution" during the upheaval of the early 20th century (75). London believed that any wealthy ruling class would use governmental powers such as the military to maintain power,[72] and so his novel first fell into an authoritarian dystopia prior to an eventual socialist utopia in the distant future. The "prescient" novel ends with the destruction of American society in the early 20th century by corporate oligarchs and a resulting police state prior to an eventual utopian society hundreds of years later (Tichi, Afterward) because London decided a statement must be made in light of capitalism's power. Radical Ernest Everhard acts as a working-class philosopher, and socialists seek the abolition of the conflict between American classes. Everhard's socialist movement begins a political revolution against the overwhelming power of "that monster of the ages, the Oligarchy" (London, *The Iron* 192), which initially fails yet ultimately starts a pattern of

[72] London made this claim in a socialist news publication at *The Iron Heel*'s publication: "History shows that no master class is ever willing to let go without a quarrel. The capitalists own the governments, the armies and the militia. Don't you think the capitalists will use these institutions to keep themselves in power? I do" (qtd. in Foner 96).

rebellion until the authoritarian capitalist regime is overthrown. The so-called "Everhard Manuscript" by Ernest's wife Avis describes the rise of a powerful Oligarchy in the United States in the 20th century, which is then paired with the reassurance that socialism would eventually succeed and take its place via a foreword and footnotes by the historian Anthony. The two writers never truly converse because they are separated by hundreds of years (Khouri 179); yet with this pairing, London concretely situates the failure to implement socialism – and the resulting violent struggles – with the later successes of revolutionary forces (Berliner 60, Garcia 200). Action is the ultimate goal for all aspects of the work.

It is rare that novels are noted as vehicles for direct social change, such as Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* London desired for his writing as popular fiction to work as a "megaphone that amplified his voice to millions each day of the week" even as he still sought financial success (Tichi, Introduction). *The Iron Heel* was the "most deliberate" fictional text by London (Stein 78); he actively promoted *The Iron Heel* in 1908 as a tool to influence audiences and energize them for a political fight (Garcia 200, Berliner 60).[73] As Tichi describes his political messaging, "Unlike Upton Sinclair, who pummeled readers with a constant barrage of industrial society's horrors on nearly every page of fiction, London preferred to pace his utopian reformist messages, to touch down throughout his narrative with graphic exposition that alternated with glancing blows and subtle jabs" (Introduction). His message was full of frustration at the current

[73] According to Tichi, London wrote *The Iron Heel* and intentionally referenced widely publicized strikes during the Progressive Era, in particular the 1886 Chicago Haymarket Riot which had a bomb thrown at a labor rally. Interestingly, London was also partial to Chicago as a final setting for his novel because Sinclair's *The Jungle* had placed Chicago in the public consciousness as a socialist-movement setting (Chapter 3).

capitalist system for his socialist readers, as well as faith in the eventual success of socialism in a distant future (Foner 89). This frame was consistently meant as inspiration for his fellow socialists. In essence, he declares that others must look at what America can become *if only* the fight commences. And as Tichi additionally argues, the socio-political structures of the 21st century invite another look at London and his political writings: just as "the country is once again experiencing an era of vast disparities" between classes, "the reappraisal of Jack London as a figure who championed progressive reform" for explicitly political reasons fits as well (Introduction). Einhorn directly takes up this concept with his adaptation. His play rewrites leftist themes from London's novel in order to engender general calls for social changes via his didactic and adaptive political work. Many of London's prophecies in his novel require little updating, especially to 21st century connections such as prolonged international wars and mass media influences (Raskin 1). Due to these similarities, Einhorn seeks out echos not only with the early 20th century but London's body of socialist literature in specific, and Einhorn adapts London's most overtly political and prophetic work because he seeks to engage with London's most didactic political writings.

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Alongside his literary inspirations, Einhorn's "Adaptor's Notes" include a brief explanation of his intentions for political adaptation in 2016 with leftist messaging. These notes detail his intentions for the play as a rewritten version of *The Iron Heel* with didactic political commentary for a new century; just like London, his political intent is overt, as detailed by his ideas about theatrical production and American literature. He agrees with London's sentiment about fighting for leftist policies, although he likewise

does not outline a Bellamy-type blueprint for that society or its establishment. His focus remains action taken and advocacy spoken, as no change can occur without such intentional struggle. Yet even as he bases the primary plot of the play in an achieved utopian future, this adaptation is inescapably premised upon the dramatist's perspective of an American past. Einhorn elaborates on the importance of London's novel primarily because it resonates with his historical moment – because, as he believes, "the rhymes [from the early 20th century] … they are everywhere," with specific examples of reemerging political ideologies for Einhorn including then-presidential candidates Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. He elaborates: "London's novel is a fascinating historical text, but of course my deeper interest in it is the way in which the American society of a century ago rhymes so closely with so many of the issues we face today" (*The Iron* 12). Einhorn desires to engage in these echoes of an American past via an adaptation for his intended audience because he recognizes the socio-economic disparity in the 2010s alongside a need for renewed socialist struggle against such inequality.

With the background on London in mind, Einhorn's conception of "rhymes" more clearly connects with his adaptive goals for recognizable historical framing and continued motivation for socialist change. Although his perception remains based mostly in historical context overall, Linda Hutcheon's conception of adaptation as repetition but not direct replication parallels Einhorn's rhymes, with the rhyme similar to a "mutation" for a new context and audience (7, 32). To understand these rhymes, as well as this framing of political adaptation from an American past, what Einhorn describes as historical "rhymes" from the early 20th century should accordingly not be considered the entire structure for Einhorn's adaptation, even as Einhorn himself focuses on this description

for his play. Instead, as a 21st century political adaptation of an early 20th century political narrative, the work contemplates an unactualized possibility from an American past. In other words, the 2016 *Iron Heel* seeks an American past not as perceived failure but potential still to be realized. This frame is further contextualized by Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," with primary focus on his concept of historical narrative as recognizing a past which is full of potential: "[…] our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. The same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history" (254). The past as Benjamin outlines here is entwined with missed potential, a still lingering redemption within historical narratives. Leftist literature is not seeped in historical failure alone but in possibilities worth the inherent risk attached to attempts at contemporaneous actualization. History is not a product but an activity, a constant process of consideration and communication (Simay 139). Political adaptation is one such form of historical communication because a core narrative is retained even as literary content is reshaped for a fresh audience with transformed social interests.

In this vein, American history – a history supposedly seeped in failure for leftist political action and didactic political literature – becomes conceivable only because other possibilities were missed. Redemption therefore remains attainable as a "missed, deferred and unseized" potential, recognizable yet unachieved (Hamacher 39). The present relates to "that which was possible in the past but was missed" (38); the future, conversely, is a stable goal for desirable outcomes. In particular, these unactualized possibilities can be brought into importance again for a present or even a future:

> Each possibility that was missed in the past remains a possibility for the future, precisely because it has not found fulfillment. For the past to have a future merely means that the past's possibilities have not yet found their fulfillment, that they continue to have an effect as intentions and demand their realization from those who feel addressed by them. When past things survive, then it is not lived out […] what survives are the unactualized possibilities of that which is past. This is historical time only in so far as there is an excess of the unactualized, the unfinished, failed, thwarted, which leaps beyond its particular Now and demands from another Now its settlement, correction and fulfillment. (40-1)

Unrealized possibilities from a past can be expanded into still realizable possibilities for a future, a fulfillment still available for those desiring or demanding it. London's novel *The Iron Heel* sets up an immediate future and a distant future for its early 20th century readers, one projected time surpassed by Einhorn's audience and the other still very much out of reach. While utopia can remain future projection, the missing socialist revolution can also be revisited via adaptation in the 21st century. London's unmet revolutionary possibilities do not need to be considered a failure; they can instead be adapted as a process of redemption during the 21st century. London's socialist revolution does not need to fade away as a missed opportunity. It can be an unseized possibility explored within the mode of didactic political adaptation – a rewritten narrative that considers the potential of an unrealized past as venerated by an inspirational socialist future. Adaptation becomes that communicated mode for redemption and viable change. Therefore, the 2016 play *The Iron Heel* does not only present echoes from America's past because similar political issues still exist. Rather, this revisiting of a past via adaptation can encourage political action, a correction of unrealized desires brought to the forefront once again in the 21st century.

At this point, however, it is important to recognize that an obsession with an American past can become limiting and outright dangerous as well, as Jill Lepore argues

in *The Whites of Their Eyes*. Her research into the Tea Party's desire for literal "reenactment" of the Revolutionary War and the Founding Fathers' perceived desires demonstrates a political connection made "more literal than analogy" by many participants. In such a situation, it is possible to devolve so intensely into a past that the present ceases to carry weight (7, 15, 137). Such engagement retreats into an empty nostalgia for a kind of previous existence as a source of relief: "There was, though, something heartbreaking in all this [reverence for the Founding Fathers and their actions]. Behind the Tea Party's Revolution lay nostalgia for an imagined time – the 1950s, maybe, or the 1940s – less riddled with ambiguity, less divided by race. In that nostalgia was the remembrance of childhood, a yearning for a common past, comfort against an uncertain future" (97). This kind of reverence for an American past relates heavily to President Trump's tagline "Make America Great Again," an influence Einhorn would be sure to understand based on his acknowledgement of Trump's presidential campaign in his "Adaptor's Notes." But such engagement with a past is not the same kind of engagement displayed by Einhorn's adaptation. That Tea Party-associated look backward reconfigures a changeable past in order to construct a fantasy version believed to have previously existed, an America supposedly perfected without the concerns of race, gender, poverty, sickness, or any form of misery (95).[74] This interpretation leaves

[74] This point encapsulates the core message of Lepore's argument: "[The troubling idea] was the whiteness of their Revolution. The Founding Fathers were the whites of their eyes, a fantasy of an America before race, *without race*. There were very few black people in the Tea Party, but there were no black people at all in the Tea Party's eighteenth century. Nor, for that matter, were there any women, aside from Abigail Adams, and no slavery, poverty, ignorance, insanity, sickness, or misery. Nor was there any art, literature, sex, pleasure, or humor. There were only the Founding Fathers with their white wigs, wearing their three-concerned hats, in their Christian nation, revolting against taxes, and defending their right to bear arms" (95).

believers "floating on a surface of yesterday" without a sense of investigation or empathy – just an abstract reverence for a time never truly real (19, 162). Catering to a past is dangerous and limiting, just as only looking to the future for a blueprint of ideals is untenable; yet the effort of this didactic literature remains entirely separate from both of these conceptions. This version of *The Iron Heel* demonstrates the power created by an "unactualized past" instead of a nostalgic one, a past perceived by a utopic future and a malleable present. This past is not a thing to reconstruct in the image of a previous fantasy. This version of a past instead is one full of previous so-called failures ripe with potential for adaptation and evolution. Interrogation and imagination are the key elements.

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The 2016 political play therefore engages with transformative decisions in connection to both a past and a present, but those moments are crafted from the perspective of a utopian future – one of the most distinct adaptational changes for the stage version of the narrative. The adaptation sets the work in a stable utopian future while still interacting with an American past, and that past remains full of unactualized political possibilities, a decision that notably engenders didactic narratives based in those possibilities for a viewing present. Although utopian literature has been referenced in this chapter, the evolution of utopian literature is significant as a method of American political literature. Both London and Einhorn engage in an imagined future as core components of their works, primarily because they see possible utopia as socialist politics realized. Einhorn's 2016 play and London's 1908 novel are essentially rewriting so-called typical utopian narratives in American literature, particularly because they

consider the desire to restructure society via revolutionary action much more meaningful than a fictional representation of that society already attained. After all, an imagined future may actually be stable and outlined as previously discussed, but it is also influenced by the recognized yet unachieved possibility previously desired in a past. The radical and the revolutionary in any utopia are settings for transformation and struggle in the present (Ventura). Most importantly for the construction of this adapted narrative, an unrealized potential can become possible in that stable future for a reading or a viewing audience, unchanging in its perfected conception as no longer a leftist failure. That utopia can exist as a political revolution realized, but this shift retains important genre expectations from the more emblematic utopian narratives in the American canon.

As shown by the influential novel *Looking Backward,* Bellamy and many of his fellow late 19th and early 20th century political writers pressed into utopia, into the future, as a method of arguing for socialist policies. These futures were concrete, with developed systems for governing, working, and living as an equitable society. A utopian plan – a realized goal – was the desired outcome, not necessarily possibility and moldability. Additionally, visions such as Bellamy's were constructed as visions of social and economic change within preexisting social frameworks similar to their own contemporaneous time because the goal was revision within society's existing structures, a structure that often recreated gendered and racialized social norms within a stable political structure (Abbott 372). Yet the utopian narrative has declined in influence over the last century, in particular as a literary form, with utopia now often viewed as limited and inaccessible. Fredric Jameson argues that, although utopian thinking and writing has been associated with overly-simplistic approaches to socialism as an alternative to

capitalism since Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (*Archaeologies* xii, 20),[75] utopian narratives predominantly transitioned with great success into the science-fiction genre by the late 20th century because such works could encounter the future without a particular punctual ending (101, 283).[76] Continued progress is still possible within these fruitful science-fiction works, a distinct contrast to the already perfected society imagined by Bellamy. Utopian narratives often struggle with a portrayal of history because they are seen as "political fulfillment" instead of extended potential (186), a perfected moment in time instead of a progression to social change. Utopia therefore articulates the need to look forward, yet skeptics can see such conceptualizations as "futuristic escapism" and limited (Ventura); these narratives can therefore become static and ineffectual as literature.[77] As Jameson states, pure utopia "does not tell a story at all; it describes a mechanism or even a kind of machine, it furnishes a blueprint rather than lingering upon the kinds of human relations that might be found in a Utopian condition or imagining the

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[75] Right-wing utopian thought is also very possible in political criticism and literature; however, a general presumption remains that utopian thought is associated with socialist and/or leftist ideology (Levitas xiii). Jameson asserts that he does not see a true separation of utopia from socialism as possible in most literary traditions (*Archaeologies* 196-7).

[76] Science fiction is able to show the present as history to an audience, yet still demonstrates the limitations of utopian imagination (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 288). With primary differences located around technological advances, the genre actually showcases an inability to imagine true utopia because "the systemic, cultural and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another prisoner" remains a powerful influence over contemporary literature (289).

[77] Jameson also notes that socialism has moved from "the world of Utopian fantasy to that of practical politics" in the 21st century (*Archaeologies* 55), and I agree with the return of socialism to American political consciousness overall. However, I also argue that utopian thought has emerged within didactic adaptive political texts outside of science fiction in the 2010s, such as in the 2016 adaptation of *The Iron Heel*, which was published after Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future.*

kinds of living we wish were available in some stable, well-nigh permanent availability" (*The Seeds* 56).

Even as Bellamy-like utopian narratives continue to fade from prominence, the desire for utopia persists in the American imagination, a crucial distinction to understanding the eventual desire to adapt such ideas by Einhorn in the 21st century via his utopian setting. Contemporary socialism has moved from the world of utopian fantasy to that of practical politics in the United States because utopian narratives are often alienating to the American public, as Jameson notes, and contemporary narratives are more focused on future environmental consequences, such as pollution and overpopulation, and the very real consequences that result from such decisions instead of broader societal restructuring (*Archaeologies* 52-5, "Introduction" 364).[78] As utopian narratives primarily speak to the ills of a society's present, the imagined futures reconstruct the struggles of the contemporaneous moment, struggles often limited in the early 21st century to concerns such as climate change and environmentalism. But utopian thought can still be a powerful tool in contemporary political imaginings, in particular because those imaginings speak to political desires during the 21st century on a national scale, with President Barack Obama's "Hope" campaign and Senator Sanders' "A Future to Believe In" as exemplifying this transition. Obama's message often referenced

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[78] To be clear, there is a difference between utopian novels as created by Bellamy and literature with utopian themes. Such themes continue today in popular works such as *Black Panther* and *Hidden Figures,* as outlined by Patricia Ventura in *Race and Utopian Desire in American Literature and Society.* This project does not discount this work, as London and Einhorn both engage with utopian themes more than they create Bellamy-like utopian literature as previously argued. Instead, this chapter recognizes the overall changes to utopian literature as well as leftist utopian thought so that a better frame can be understood for Einhorn's play specifically and 21st century political engagement broadly.

America's past in order to encourage changes in 2008 because he viewed the future as the most pliable, while Sanders often emphasized America's past as full of potential starting points for an imagined American future in both 2016 and 2019.[79] Their engagements differ in spirit, with one more aligned toward practical politics and the other, as Patricia Ventura describes utopian writings, more a "deeply political and resistive act."

Obama emphasized an achievable present and future with his famous "Yes, We Can" slogan, as demonstrated in his South Carolina primary victory speech in 2008. The phrase "Yes, We Can" became a declaration for America to move on from the so-called failures of previous political acts: "This election is about the past vs. the future. It's about whether we settle for the same divisions and distractions and drama that passes for politics today or whether we reach for a politics of common sense and innovation, a politics of shared sacrifice and shared prosperity. […] Yes, we can. Yes, we can change. Yes, we can. Yes, we can heal this nation. Yes, we can seize our future" ("Obama"). Here, Obama was not only making a clear distinction between the failings of America's past with a defined hope for a realizable future; he was also asserting that "divisions and distractions and drama" can be detrimental to a utopian vision of the United States. America's past is in opposition with America's future here, and Obama focuses on the potential of a future in this speech. He engages in utopic conceptions via the previously mentioned idea of "practical politics," desiring common sense as a method for reaching ahead to a worthy American future.

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[79] To clarify, neither politician does one type of discussion exclusively in public commentary. However, the contrast does show a shift in emphasis for American political discussion.

Conversely, while Sanders may reject certain conservative political perspectives from the past, he also promotes a utopian message that reached backward into a leftist American past as a completion of previous utopian visions for the United States. Sanders' messaging contemplates America's past not as a narrative to reject but one to revisit because of political possibilities. As one example, Sanders explicated a connection to the New Deal policies of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt during his 2016 and 2020 political campaigns for the presidency (Debenedetti, "Sanders").[80] In a June 2019 speech on democratic socialism, for example, Sanders called to finish FDR's Economic Bill of Rights for the 21st century and pitched his definition of democratic socialism as an alternative to oligarchy and authoritarianism ("Senator" 23:30, 42:00). Just like FDR and his "progressive coalition" (18:45), Sanders argued that opposition to his candidacy emphasized the importance and viability of his government proposals, just like FDR's time as the leader of the progressive wing of the Democratic party.[81] He claimed a possibility from that connection for his goals. Others also equated Sanders as the

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[80] Sanders does reference other former presidents during his speech, such as Lyndon B. Johnson, Bill Clinton, Harry Truman, and Barack Obama ("Senator" 19:30, 34:00). However, his focus remains unquestionably on FDR and his brand of progressive policies.

[81] Sanders was very careful with his use of terms like "progressive" for FDR and "democratic socialist" for himself in this speech, even as he emphasized his political similarities to the former president. For example, Sanders claimed that "I [Sanders] and other progressives" have been called a socialist as an attack ("Senator" 30:00), but he only labeled himself a democratic socialist by choice (28:00, 43:30). This thin line is recognized in much of the coverage on Sanders' speech, although some viewed claims of separation as misleading while others noted the blended understanding of such terms in politics for over a century. Examples include Jim Newell of *Slate* writing that Sanders compared himself to "good old (not socialist) FDR," Harold Meyerson of *The American Prospect* wondering why Sanders does not mention proclaimed socialists of the Progressive Era such as Eugene Debs, and both Seth Ackerman and Branko Marcetic of *Jacobin* arguing that FDR's New Deal was viewed as socialism during his presidency.

continuation of past socialist desires and possibilities: Sanders is positioned as the inheritor of Eugene Debs' socialist legacy by the graphic novel *Eugene V. Debs: A Graphic Biography* (Van Sciver 127),[82] and he acquires Upton Sinclair's political struggles as framed by *Jacobin* magazine because the publication created a cover that updated Sinclair's *I, Governor of California, and How I Ended Poverty* with *I, President of the United States, and How I Ended Poverty* in 2019 (Rugar). A similar approach was taken in a campaign ad narrated by rapper Killer Mike, which cited James Baldwin's desire to no longer wait for political change ("Killer Mike"). Instead of a continued pattern of denial for American citizens, Killer Mike emphasizes no longer abiding by inaction; as he repeats in the ad, "the time is now" for completing the promises of an American past, a present political claim to better a prospective future based in previously demonstrated political desires.

Obama and Sanders are not unique in their rhetoric, but they both are nationally famous representations of 21st century trends for political discussion. Yet, their versions of utopia, in particular versions of utopia based in understandings of America's past, emphasize different approaches to the country's previous politics. While Obama's 2008 presidential campaign argued that the election showed a potential path forward by claiming to set hope in an improved future on present and future actions, a new decade has shown instead a recapturing of America's past in a resurgence of outright historical narratives in order to encounter a utopian narrative full of possibilities, with Sanders' campaign not claiming a past's failures but instead its potentially unfinished successes.

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[82] This graphic novel about Debs is also discussed in the introduction to this project. For further analysis, please refer to that content.

"The political," as Ventura explains, "rooted not only in the existing will of the multitude aligned against power but in their potential capacities to create structural alternatives, is what the desire for utopia taps into." Sanders' messaging, as well as his reintroduction of democratic socialism into American mainstream awareness in 2016, created a space for Einhorn's *The Iron Heel* and its outright didactic literature for a 21st century audience. The "anti-rebel" literary content overlaps with the outright political claims present on many American news outlets and political publications, even if those outlets still presented socialism as "dangerous" and not "respectable" just like the claims from the early 20th century (London, Preface 124-5). The political commentary has shifted, and the literature echoes this new pattern of engagement.

In a similar pattern to political campaigning and commentary, therefore, utopian literature has had a complementary shift from the early 2000s to the 2010s. Utopian content throughout American history has promised grand solutions to social issues such as property rights, labor disputes, and gender and race inequality (*Archaeologies* 145); yet such direct political engagement in literature fell out of style as the 20th century progressed, as detailed in the previous chapter's discussion of Upton Sinclair and E.L. Doctorow, and utopias likewise became far less common as literary content (212). Jameson describes a change for utopian literature in the United States from a prescriptive social plan to a descriptive political critique and a "diagnostic instrument" (*Archaeologies* 148), with Sanders' campaign materials as more critique in need of completion in this case and Obama's speech as more instrument for future projections. Previous utopian narratives in American literature were distanced from "coherent historical and practical-political" ideas and rarely instigated "an account of agency" in his

view (232), again calling back to the style and construction of Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. But social critique is a different method of approach for the committed political desires:

> What is Utopia becomes, then, not the commitment to a specific machinery or blueprint, but rather the commitment to imagining possible Utopias as such, in their greatest variety of forms. Utopia is no longer the invention and defense of a specific floor plan, but rather the story of all the arguments about how Utopia should be constructed in the first place. It is no longer the exhibit of an achieved Utopian construct, but rather the story of its production and of the very process of construction as such. (217)

This focus on process over product is important in light of London's *The Iron Heel,* with particular resonance about any adaptation of the novel. As utopian narratives shift from a commentary *about* a preconceived society to a method *toward* a bettered society, a narrative such as *The Iron Heel* can be a starting point for social critique, as well as an ideal novel for adaptation as a didactic political work in the 21st century.

Jameson's identification of utopia as not simply "the representation of radical alternatives" but instead "simply the imperative to imagine" such radical ideas (*Archaeologies* 416) is one embraced by both London at the turn of the previous century and Einhorn in the 2010s, even as both men's literary works also recognize the tensions which result from such imaginings. Utopian narratives may be placed in an imagined future, but their arguments are consistently about present social concerns (Levitas xii). The utopian method in the 21st century can be utilized as a "critical tool for exposing the limitations of current policy discourse about economic growth and ecological sustainability" – in other words, a method to consider human needs in possible futures (xi) if only because such focus increases attention for the politics of the present. And while this utopian impulse in political works can become problematic when a radical

difference becomes "unrealizable [or], what is worse, unimaginable" (Levitas xv), this imagination is critical to the continuation of political writing in American literature, a continuation done via adaptation in works such as Einhorn's *The Iron Heel.*

Of course, this model of thought remains focused on a utopian future as commentary for a politicized present, while Einhorn's play places itself at the juncture between an imagined future and an unactualized past. Rutger Bregman's *Utopia for Realists: How We Can Build the Ideal World* begins the work of connecting utopian thought to an unfulfilled history, a perspective also engaged in the 2016 adaptation. Bregman claims that a dream for a better future is essential to 21st century concerns, even as those ideals are proven understandable via a recognized past (21): "The widespread nostalgia, the yearning for a past that never really was, suggests that we still have ideals, even if we have buried them alive" (19). Moving forward relies on an acknowledgement of a fallible past because that past teaches "a simple but crucial lesson: *Things could be different"* (77-8, emphasis original). Possibility is recognizable, and an imagined utopia does not dismiss such imaginings. Even with this contrast, Bregman also warns that socialist efforts from the American left often fail because, in his words, "the left actually like losing." He argues that "all the failure, the doom, and the atrocities mainly serve to prove [the left was] right all along" (257). Bergman therefore calls not for a Bellamy-like acknowledgement of a failed system alone, as often associated with leftist politics, but a new hope for utopian ideals (261, 263). With this point in mind, it is unsurprising that a work with utopian ideals as well as associated political struggles from the early 20th century has been adapted for a revitalized 21st century audience – in particular one already engaged in a significant shift toward the recognized struggle overachieved ideals

just as didactic political fiction has re-emerged in American literature as desirable once again. What becomes intriguing beyond this use of a utopian narrative, however, is desire to understand such unrealized potential of an American past within adaptive works for a 21st century audience.

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London's socialist writing and political perspectives, Einhorn's "rhyming" adaptation toward unmet possibilities, America's history with utopian literature: these interconnected elements do not alone showcase the unseized potential of an American past. However, by revisiting the desires of a past and rewriting such imaginings in a future, these facets do illuminate the use of early 20th century protest literature as didactic political adaptation in order to connection with a 21st century audience. Einhorn's *The Iron Heel* showcases this evolved version of utopian literature most obviously in the changes to the historian character, primarily because London's novel and Einhorn's play represent the narrative's version of an American past through the historian characters in such divergent manners. The historian character dramatically alters Einhorn's adaptation with her direct engagement, abandoning London's attempt to integrate his political messaging within his fiction via distanced footnotes. This rewriting results in the most significant change to the play's construction beyond the overarching shifts in time, as Einhorn's Antonia commends the 20th century characters for their revolutionary acts while London's Anthony remains a detached commentator in a distant future projection. London's historian presents a calm acceptance for his stable utopian society, and Einhorn's historian elevates moments from her perceived past as invaluable to her eventual utopia, which ultimately emphasizes the potential actions generally required

from 21st century audience members. Antonia respects a past's contributions, while Anthony's superiority from his future position is undeniable.

For a reader, Anthony Meredith as a future historian in London's *The Iron Heel* interprets the "Everhard Manuscript" and presents literature as a method of communication within an oppressive society with personal prejudice (Garcia 201, 208). Anthony's footnotes often point out any lack of knowledge or personal failings by Avis, an "arrogance" that pervades the novel consistently (Whalen-Bridge 87). Even in the fictionalized introduction to the Manuscript by Anthony, he states that the text "cannot [be viewed as] an important historical document" by his time because "it bristles with errors – not errors of fact, but errors of interpretation" (London, *The Iron* xi). Emotional exaggerations by the revolutionary Avis are dismissed by Anthony via hypothetical, objective distance (Khouri 174, 176). But even though Avis cannot speak back to Anthony, the conflicting messages and voices ensure that a single perspective never overwhelms London's narrative, which allows a reader to understand the novel's argument for both revolutionary acts from Avis' sacrifices and utopian potential from Anthony's commentary (Shaheen 49).

Most importantly, Anthony's existence is safe because he already lives in a utopian future free from the burdens of capitalism and the dreaded Oligarchy. Anthony was born into a utopia, a similar position to Bellamy's protagonist Julian West awakening in an egalitarian society, and he is influenced by this secured distance. Alternatively, the persecuted socialists Avis and Ernest are left with unfinished stories because the revolts initially fail for centuries. They do not awaken in utopia; in fact, they could not possibly live to see its fruition, despite their constant sacrifices, because the utopia does not exist

until hundreds of years later. This framing is politically useful for London because it creates needed motivation for his readers (Whalen-Bridge 82); in other words, London focuses on the need for societal change, but he does not provide the exact actions toward realized change within his fictional narrative. He does not promise an immediate paradise via time travel or political success within the year. His novel promotes sacrifice for future generations above all, and London therefore emphasizes the imperative toward political action over any outlined blueprint. London's version of the historian character may fill in any gaps in Avis's narrative by including his knowledge over her constant failings to predict the future's timeline, but Anthony never overtakes Avis as the dominant narrator because the narrative emphasizes Avis' experiences of political struggle through her own voice. As London even has Anthony recognize, "[capitalist conflict] is a ludicrous spectacle to us [referring to his fellow citizens in the utopian future], but we must not forget that we have seven centuries' advantage over those that lived in that time" (117). Avis does understand that struggle, and so Anthony's prejudicial perspective is never powerful enough to discount the worth of her seemingly small impact over the larger fight toward utopian equity.

Einhorn's historian is deliberately rewritten for the 2016 adaptation, and his version dominates audience attention. Antonia is undeniably the primary storyteller onstage. She identifies herself as both historian and propagandist in the 27th century, and she describes her work as analyzing "patterns of history" with improvisations "within the bounds of historical probability" because "the most effective propaganda is always based in truth" (*The Iron* 15, 21). In a view more similar to London's revolutionary Ernest, Antonia considers propaganda to be a positive framing for her work, even though

London's Anthony was firmly distanced and academic in his content; Antonia also performs her work as a historian in "Reenactment Drama, [her] speciality as a propagandist" as a contrast to Anthony's written research (20). This format may naturally lend itself to a theatrical work, but the change has additional implications as well. Anthony is a distanced academic who recites cited sources; Antonia is a politically engaged propagandist who personally rewrites history herself. Anthony's footnotes have been repurposed as Antonia's asides during the performances of her guests, such as a comment explaining "underhanded" Wall Street trading in "ancient New York" (74). These asides are not presented as academic context in the play but persuasive argument for her fellow utopian citizens. Antonia may acknowledge a "touch of invention" in her theater presentation style, yet she claims to "present [the audience] with the facts, as closely as [she] can to actual historical events" (21). In essence, just as Einhorn seeks no distance in his play from any political messaging, his version of the historian character conflates history, propaganda, and performance without hesitation in the adaptation's version of utopian society. She has a didactic political agenda: to uplift and venerate an initially failed but eventually realized revolutionary past as worthwhile.

Any antagonism between Avis as a revolutionary chronicler and Anthony as a distanced historian is dismissed via the adapted Antonia. Instead of a dual perspective, Antonia constantly uplifts the Everhards and recounts their importance, still an interpreter along the same vein as Anthony but entirely different in her tone. Conflicting messages are considered but then resolved by her historical knowledge because the focus becomes Antonia's propaganda and storytelling methods. London had utilized Anthony's detachment in order to increase the viability of his literature, an "idea that art should be

detached, or at least balanced to the point of political neutrality" so that his version of *The Iron Heel* would not be discounted. Whalen-Bridge describes this effort as "a way to have it both ways – detached perspective and engaged immediacy" through the paired narratives of Avis and Anthony (81). Einhorn has no such concerns. Unlike Anthony, his historian Antonia describes Ernest Everhard as "high in the councils of the socialist party" and one of its early 20th century leaders, "the acknowledged leader in the philosophy of socialism" for his time (*The Iron* 22). She is always certain of her interpretations because she stays within "historical probability," as she describes her work; her perspective on history is impacted by her own socialist beliefs, shaped by the socialist utopia within which she lives. And unlike Anthony's utopian life creating an arrogant perspective toward initially unsuccessful battles against capitalism, Antonia views these rebellions as political responses worthy of consideration and veneration. Anthony emphasizes distance, a tactic London utilized in order to spread his political commentary within a more-palatable novel structure. Antonia instead argues for direct action without distance, an approach Einhorn echos because he reaches for still-possible social change without any separation of fictional content from political response. These changes articulate that a utopian future does still exist as inspiration in this adaptation, but that future seeks out an American past for its conceptualization; rather than rejecting this narrative's historical past, a 21st century audience can imagine the missed possibilities as fulfillment and redemption valued by those in a perfected future.

Because Antonia does not simply retell history, she embraces her position as advocate and propagandist for socialist reformers such as Ernest and Avis. She also engages the audience in a way that Anthony's footnotes could not and did not intend to

do. Antonia communicates these stories as "historical fact" while also recognizing the potential for innovation – or, to phrase another way, for adaptation. As a storyteller, Antonia focuses on "what was most likely said" by her chosen historical figures, and she is receptive to improvisation and questioning only as long as "the bounds of historical probability are maintained" (Einhorn, *The Iron* 21). Similar to London's novel, the 2016 version of *The Iron Heel* can become dense in its political commentary, and so Antonia as the historian will act as both a vessel for political rhetoric as well as a disruptive force when too much political argumentation weighs on the narrative. Antonia will converse with other characters or request that the audience join her in song in these moments, a method to engender "interesting food for thought" before she returns to the premise of her own expertise on "the logic of history" (Weber). The audience therefore trusts her information about the early 20th century and engages when she directs them to do so, even though she declares her motivations as a propagandist from the very start. She intends to validate the socialist perspective of her utopian society, as well as the actions of past heroes deemed unimportant in the previous version of the tale.

Of course, Antonia is not the only speaker in the play, and her conversations with other characters invite a consideration of distinct possibilities within the narrative's past. Her innovative style provocatively relates back to Benjamin's argument about narrative not as product but activity, communication as the act of telling a story from a particular perspective (Simay 139). Inspired by Benjamin's work, Philippe Simay claims that a story depends on the capacity of the storyteller – and, in the case of Einhorn's play, arguably the additional actors included to perform and interpret the narrative – to understand and relay certain historical information. This process inevitably leads to

“oblivion, deformation, but also innovation” because the story formed in the present moment must allow for the potential of “invention, of recreation” (140). While this structure can become troubling, especially when only the “tradition of the oppressors” is retold by the dominant class for the purpose of conformity (142, 150), it can also lead to a recognition of possibilities. These possibilities are discoverable if the storyteller can allow for both remembrance and innovation, and that innovation is emphasized by the process of questioning a past and its formation. “If the present turns toward the past,” Simay argues, it is “to be *questioned* by [that past],” as the produced story is then “an answer found in the past to a question formulated in the present” (140, 151). Remaining in a purely utopian narrative, one focused on a blueprint design and a stable society, may discourage certain questions in order to avoid historical presumptions (Jameson, “World-Reduction” 380); yet in the play’s utopian setting, the character of Antonia reaches back into historical narrative for possibility, for inspiration, even recognizing questions despite her desire to provide a singular answer for them. This potential for innovation – for adaptation – is imperative to the 2016 *The Iron Heel*’s ability to engender a discussion of past possibilities because it encourages the audience to question their stable version of an American past as well. The past can become a past because realized actions alone cease to dominate such a narrative.

The most prominent example of this innovation can be understood in Antonia’s conversations with a character simply listed as “Actor.” One of the invited guests, the Actor is the only participant to question Antonia’s version of the Everhard Manuscript during the performance. Most utopian citizens outside of Antonia only speak as their 20th century counterparts, while the Actor has an individual voice in this futuristic setting. He

often wonders about this narrated past and its inhabitants, and Antonia always responds to his questions – although her answers relate specifically to her propagandistic perspective. The Actor is eventually dismissed by Antonia during her production, either by her knowledge from the Manuscript or the strength of her presumptions about their political history. But the play includes his interjections regardless, moments which entreat audience members to consider his perspective. When the Actor asks if the Oligarchy was extreme enough to threaten socialist Ernest in such a "blatant" manner for his beliefs, for example, Antonia replies that she is "certain of it" before requesting the play to continue (Einhorn, *The Iron* 65-6). In another scene, the Actor argues that some political leaders must have wanted peace, while Antonia claims the need for revolution first as a "scientific fact" (85). These scenes can appear dismissive at first glance, even problematic as Antonia takes on the mantle of authority beyond reproach. But the mere presence of questioning within a utopian society already displaces any presumed stability, and these moments allow both for innovation by the storyteller and additional questions about an American past from the listening audience. The questions are answered as Antonia recreates this history as the designated historian, while the questions are also a method of interrogating unactualized possibilities and their continued impact on contemporary American politics. Antonia rewrites history to elevate the Everhards – no longer stuck in a narrative of failure – while the Actor keeps unrecognized possibilities open to further interpretation.

During his most aggressive questioning, the Actor considers Ernest's possible involvement in a terrorist attack at the United States Capital. This attack puts Ernest into

prison and keeps him out of any further political actions against the dreaded Oligarchy. In her journal, Avis declares her husband innocent. But the Actor is not convinced as yet:

> Actor: Was he?
> Antonia: Was he what?
> Actor: Guilty.
> Antonia: No, of course not. The Black Hundreds must have done the deed, in service of the Oligarchy.
> Actor: So that was later proven?
> Antonia: No, the crime was never solved. But Avis said the same.
> Actor: She loved him, of course.
> Antonia: Yes.
> Actor: So she would never believe him capable of such an act.
> Antonia: What are you trying to say?
> Actor: I was just wondering whether you thought it possible that the revolutionaries were involved. Maybe not Everhard, but someone else within the party.
> Antonia: It was one of the Black Hundreds. I am certain of it. (104)

Antonia does not dispute any of the Actor's points during this conversation. She agrees that Avis loved her husband, and she admits that the crime was never officially solved in the early 20th century. She offers the Black Hundreds as an alternative, fictional secret agents of the Oligarchy who disguised themselves as fellow workers and used violent tactics to destroy the reputation of the working-class socialists (71).[83] All of these points are drawn from her understanding of this particular version of history, and the

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[83] Historically, the Black Hundreds were a strong far-right nationalist movement in early 20th century Russia: "The Black Hundreds believed in Russian National purity and the need to secure it through mass Russification and the relocation of some non-Russian groups" such as the Jewish population (Savino 38). This historical group was also very dedicated to the imperial leadership of Russia at the time, a potential connection to the fictional version's dedication to the Oligarchy. However, according to a footnote from Anthony Meredith in London's novel, the name is only imported from Russia within this fictional world, and the Black Hundreds in both the novel and the adapted play are therefore not meant to be the Russian group specifically: "The name only, and not the idea, was imported from Russia. The Black Hundreds were a development out of the secret agents of the capitalists, and their use arose in the labor struggles of the nineteenth century" (London, *The Iron* 141).

information shapes her innovative approach to the narrative. However, she also recreates a past by finding answers and possibilities based on her knowledge – in other words, she promotes propaganda about the Everhards. She receives the Actor's questions, which allows alternative possibilities to be recognized for that past; then, she claims a narrative to adapt and share as correct and fitting to her selected socialist figures. As a propagandist and historian, she has no limitations on her uses of history for such purposes. But the possibilities interrogated here only create more potential for a reimagined interrogation of unfulfilled potential in the present, and the play distinctly makes room for such discussion.

The play ends on a similar note of questioning, with the Actor by this point mostly accepting Ernest's heroics. However, the final set of questions in *The Iron Heel* adaptation expand the narrative beyond just propaganda about the Everhards, which allows for a truly open discussion about an American past with even more unseized possibilities. The final lines of Avis' journal hope for a better society in the future, and Antonia declares that their socialist utopia must have been her dream (130-1). Then, still identified as their early 20th century counterparts in the script, Avis and Ernest ask Antonia about their own fates. This questioning is an extension of the Actor's previous attempts, figures from a past framed as asking about their own past's meaning through utopian counterparts. These characters are uncovering innovative tellings and unseized possibilities as they are in turn questioning that past's interpretation. As a literary adaptation, these questions are especially important for Avis as a character. While the early 20th century Avis remains dead and unable to engage with a past, this future utopian citizen acting as Avis can recognize her counterpart's sacrifices and extend her narrative

through this interrogation of her past. Einhorn's rewriting gains agency compared to London's version of Avis, a character who could never speak back and remained dismissed by Anthony as an arbiter of her history. Avis' life in the 2016 narrative is therefore embraced as a worthy story as well as one outside of simplified failure.

In the same final scene, the Actor continues this line of questioning with a specific focus on Ernest's cause of death, as well as an inquiry about the fates of other recognized figures from Avis' journal. Antonia claims that Ernest must have been executed, although a trial transcript was never found; her knowledge comes in this case from the "logic of history" as the innovative storyteller. But the Actor is not quite satisfied and continues his questions, a response that additionally manifests other possibilities for the audience to contemplate. As he recognizes, "[Ernest] could have died so many different ways. Maybe through a fellow revolutionary's mistake, like Biedenbach. Or by the hand of someone gone mad, like Jackson's victims. Or the victim of a stray bomb, like the Bishop, How do we know it is by execution?" (132). The Actor here remembers other figures from *The Iron Heel*'s revolutionary narrative, found both in London's novel and Einhorn's play. All of these characters were men related to Ernest's socialist cause. Comrade Biedenbach was the "gentle-souled" German volunteer who was killed because he did not remember the secret signals in a "sad mistake" (London, *The Iron* 222). Jackson was a good worker crippled during his time in a factory and left without a method to support his family, a mistreated man who became an "anarchist" after he was reduced by the broken labor system to "a mere animal, mad with hate and lust for revenge" (34-5, 228). Bishop Morehouse was a religious man who discovered the "unspeakable horror" of contemporaneous labor conditions and unleashed a "violent

assault upon the established morality" of Christianity before he was sent to an asylum; he attempted to assist the poor after his moral awakening, but his ultimate fate was death by a bomb during the First Revolt against the capitalists (51, 96, 286). Ernest could have died in many possible ways or even had similar fates as these men persecuted by the Iron Heel's power: so as the Actor asks, how can Antonia know that it was by execution, and why does the only possibility considered by her need to be an execution? Why must the narrative be limited?

In asking these questions, the Actor creates possibilities in a retold past, struggles that could still be renewed and reborn for the audience. The Actor returns to the lives of these men and their sacrifices because their heroism can also inspire political action and further possibilities. Their different stories – about corrupted religion and cruel labor systems – can also be revisited and even redeemed if the audience members listen. As Antonia determines Ernest's death by execution, even she expands her narrative based on the Actor's questions. She categorizes Ernest now as "one of many heroes" during the First Revolt (Einhorn, *The Iron* 132-3), and unseized possibilities attributed to other heroes therefore take root in contemporary minds. Such unrealized possibilities from an American past, fictional yet still based in early 20th century realities, are still realizable struggles in the 21st century, and many more heroes can fulfill the unachieved political desires presented by Antonia, the Actor, the Everhards, and even London. All can inspire revolutionary acts, better treatment of workers, and an end to social disparity. Ernest is one socialist hero in Avis' journal, but there are others with similar yet unique potential desires. Due to these included questions, many possibilities are present and remembered

as the play draws to a close. The narrative validates Antonia's socialist propaganda while expanding recoverable possibilities.

Ernest's struggles and the struggles of his fellow revolutionaries are carried from this malleable past through the utopian citizenry to Einhorn's contemporaneous audience. To close the play, just after the Actor's questions, a final protest song is included titled "The Red Flag." According to Antonia, this song "was written at the end of the nineteenth century […] as if they could see into the future, see the struggles of the revolution, see through the centuries all the way to today" (133). Of course, the today that Antonia denotes is actually an inspirational future to the audience, one still requiring those viewers to take political action and seize it from an American past's possibilities. And all those in the physical performance space, the representations from different historical moments – the early 20th century characters, the early 21st century actors and audience members, the 27th century fictional utopian citizenry – come together and sing about those ideas and people long dead which are never truly gone:

> The people's flag is deepest red,
> It shrouded oft our martyred dead,
> And ere their limbs grew stiff and cold,
> Their hearts' blood dyed its every fold. (134)

The martyred may be dead, but the struggle remains recognizable and inspirational in the flag dyed red by their sacrifices. The hearts' desires are now redeemable, despite their deaths, as the flag waves on.

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And so, even as Einhorn centers his 2016 adaptation on the perceived "rhymes" with an American past, such a past vitally remains accessible to remolding because it is

full of unseized possibilities. The imagined utopian future still remains as a desired outcome, similar to London's original intention, but its potential also rests in a reconfiguration of America's past, with the intended 2010s audience situated between a desirable future and an inspirational past. That past may not have been fulfilled in all manners, but it still contains inspiration for action, with didactic political American literature as the storytelling tool to communicate those possibilities. As previously mentioned, Antonia does include a "Revolt of 2016" in her list of previous revolutionary uprisings against the dominant Oligarchy, a moment to draw the viewing audience into the narrative (Einhorn, *The Iron* 23). Yet this inclusion actually highlights the choice to keep the primary revolutionary action in the early 20th century as well. Ernest Everhard does not become a leader in the Occupy Wall Street movement or an ally for the Black Lives Matter protests during this adaptation; he also is not suddenly a Bernie Bro against a Southern border wall for all that Einhorn recognizes Trump and Sanders as his "rhymes" with Progressive Era politics. Ernest does not manifest these individuals in the 21st century because Ernest Everhard is not the needed political leader during the 2010s. He is potential inspiration from an American literary past, a possibility not realized during London's life but still potentially actualized for Einhorn's time. The character remains a socialist leader based in America's past *because* that past is still filled with unseized possibilities, just as powerful then as they can again become as redemption in the present. This creative decision has a significant impact upon the narrative itself, in particular the politics advocated within the play. London's *The Iron Heel* was completely set in the future for his contemporaneous readers, first the immediate future via the upcoming socialist revolution within which they must participate and second the distant

future via the eventual utopian society for which they all must fight. By keeping Antonia's storytelling about a possible narrative from the early 20th century, Einhorn creates a narrative frame that situates his audience in between a revolutionary start and a utopian future. They are no longer being inspired by the upcoming fight only, as London initially intended; they are inspired by the similarities of this conceived past and its adaptive potential in the present because such a narrative is based in an American past with countless unrealized opportunities instead of failures.

Jameson writes that utopia often functions as an "alternative ultimatum of sorts, a final point in history perfected beyond continued alteration" (*Archaeologies,* 209). Einhorn's adaptation of *The Iron Heel* does not contest this perspective, as Antonia's society is never found to have flaws. London's novel similarly never indicates a need for change in Anthony's society, just an acceptance of its recognized past as flawed. However, the utopian societies within both political works are still interested in their pasts, unlike the somewhat ironically named *Looking Backward* and its protagonist's desire to simply flee American capitalism as a despicable nightmare. London accepted the upcoming struggle for socialism in the United States, the continued alteration needed prior to a realized utopia. As he wrote in a 1901 correspondence, "I know that socialism is not the very next step. I should much prefer to wake to-morrow in a smoothly running socialist state; but I know I shall not" (qtd. in Tichi, Chapter 2). Yet even as he recognized the struggles of the future, near and distant, London did not seek inspiration from an American past. In reaching into the possibilities of America's previous political struggles, adaptations such as Einhorn's 2016 play create space for a 21st century didactic political literature practically bursting with unfulfilled possibilities – not a past forgotten

as a nightmare but remembered as potential dreams to fuel a changeable present and inspire a desired future.

CHAPTER THREE

ENGAGING WITH AN IMPERFECT PAST: SIMULTANEITY AND THE MANY STORIES WITHIN DIRECTOR RASHID JOHNSON'S *NATIVE SON*

So far in this project, didactic political adaptations have been recognized as malleable, resilient American narratives as long as the potential for representational change is embraced. The character Upton Sinclair in *U.S.!* provides a case study about American literature's presumed shift away from didacticism by the early 21st century, an examination that ultimately demonstrates the opportunity for increased didacticism via creative adaptation instead of direct resurrection. The adaptation cannot simply be revived as a copy of its predecessor because the political circumstances surrounding any new creative work will have considerably evolved in the last 100 years. Likewise, the retelling of Jack London's futuristic novel *The Iron Heel* as a stage production illuminates the potential for adaptations to engage with both narratives set in the past as unseized potential and narratives set in the future as literary inspirations; the original novel may primarily focus on a politics for its contemporaneous future, but the adaptation adjusts to recognize its literary influences as well as its political capacities. But these adaptations also exhibit an interesting difference: While *U.S.!* mostly relies on an audience aware of Sinclair's (ineffectual) literary career during the early 20th century, the updated *Iron Heel* play can readily be experienced without prior knowledge. Yet ultimately for both works, social context matters just like any other adaptation, as Linda Hutcheon argues, because no piece of literature exists within a vacuum (142). Even if an

adaptation can be viewed without prior knowledge, a greater understanding is granted from the additional context of the previous work and its literary history, a complexity recognized and ultimately intended by the playwright for the 2016 *Iron Heel*.[84] Just like all adaptations, these works are "[not] rigid concepts of fidelity or infidelity in the adaptive process and [instead] more malleable and productive concepts of creativity" (Sanders 9); their meanings are derived in part from what is kept alongside what is revitalized or recontextualized by the adaptation itself. Recognition can therefore develop via discernible connections, with politically minded affiliations acting as just one such linkage.

As a detailed examination of such connections – various opportunities to alter past perceptions of a literary narrative as well as vitally echo previous representations within adaptations – this final chapter will analyze the 2019 film adaptation of Richard Wright's political novel *Native Son.*[85] Wright's novel has been previously adapted several times

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[84] To elaborate, I am not saying that Edward Einhorn attempted to create an adaptation for only unfamiliar audiences. As his "Adaptor's Notes" explores, his version of *The Iron Heel* is meant as an explicit political commentary for the 21st century, and he believes that London's novel resonates with the early 21st century because he sees contemporaneous rhymes with the early 20th century "everywhere" (Einhorn, *The Iron* 12). My statement here elaborates on the influences of different presentations for the intended audience. Chris Bachelder's satire presumes knowledge about Sinclair's political writing, as I elaborate in my first chapter, and a significant portion of his commentary gains strength only because Sinclair's reputation is presented as notorious. Einhorn's work may gain meaning due to audience recognition of London's original work, but Bachelder's work relies more heavily on association, in other words a resurrection of Sinclair himself to comment on the contemporary political novel, in order to maintain coherency (Bachelder, "Resurrecting").

[85] Film remains a consistently fruitful medium for adaptation, and Hollywood adapts often from literary materials such as novels, short stories, comics, graphic novels, drama, and epic poetry. According to James Welsh, as much as 85 percent of current Hollywood productions are still being appropriated from literary sources: "Adaptation has always been central to the process of filmmaking since almost the beginning and could well maintain its dominance into the cinema's second century" (xiii). And although traditional

within the last century: Paul Green and Richard Wright's 1941 play directed by Orson Welles, Pierre Chenal's 1951 film starring Wright himself as the protagonist Bigger Thomas, Jerrold Freedman's 1986 film starring Oprah Winfrey as Bigger's mother, Kent Gash's 2006 play, and Nambi E. Kelley's 2014 play. Each time, *Native Son* has been embroiled in political debate and audience criticism.[86] But most importantly for this project, director Rashid Johnson's version of the story fully embraces a "greater hybridity" (Lev 335) as an adaptation because the film is based in multiple works by multiple authors about Wright's novel – a state of multiplicity all didactic political writing must anticipate due to the diverse voices commenting on any American literature. As film scholar Robert Stam argues, literary texts are "not a closed, but an open structure" with the possibility to "be reworked by a boundless context" because the narratives are "seen through ever-shifting grids of interpretation" (57). Instead of thinking about fidelity to a particular story, film adaptations constantly rewrite and regenerate other texts as a "process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin" even if a point of origin may be assumed by viewing audiences (66).[87]

Hollywood is less concerned with fidelity out of respect and more concerned due to audience expectations, the conversation about literary influences remains consistently present in connection to the film production process (xxii, xxv). It is therefore important to include an American film adaptation in this project, especially because films will most likely reach the largest audience in the 21st century via streaming services such as the *HBOMax* platform for Johnson's *Native Son.*

[86] In this chapter, not all aspects of these additional adaptations will be considered, as the 2019 film adaptation remains the focus. However, all six direct adaptations are impacted by the expectations surrounding Wright's original work, so all six have been included to some degree, especially in connection to critical reception.

[87] Stam elaborates on this attachment to fidelity and its limitations in his article "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation": "When we say an adaptation has been 'unfaithful' to the original, the term gives expression to the disappointment we feel when a film adaptation fails to capture what we see as the fundamental narrative, thematic, and aesthetic features of its literary source" (54). Yet this "feeling" does not recognize the

Any source text is not a single text but an interconnected web displaying consciousness of other narratives, latent criticisms, and social commentaries. Just one film becomes a "dense informational network, a series of verbal cues that the adapting film can then take up, amplify, ignore, subvert, or transform" (68). The recent *Native Son* film embraces the power of such a network via its blatant identity as an adaptation, a notion best understood in connection with an expanded version of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory on simultaneity.

Simultaneity vitally opens up adaptation scholarship as it rejects adaptations as either successes or failures due to source-text comparison. The questions about adaptation shift from a focus on fidelity to questions about conscious selection of content and desire for new interpretation.[88] A text does not succeed because it is faithful to one original piece of literature from this perspective; it speaks to the multitude of influences on its creation within that larger storytelling network. In his famous criticism of the novel, Bakhtin argues for the possibility of multiple interpretations within a novel based on "interrelations" with other ideas or voices "simultaneously" (342). Adaptation scholar Dennis Cutchins extends this notion of simultaneity, "the recognition that something can be one thing and another thing at the same time," to adaptation studies because adaptations require a recognition of relationships between texts: "a moment of

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intertextual references and ultimate complexity of any adaptation (66). This chapter's research recognizes the overwhelming influence of such a "feeling" on several *Native Son* adaptations, even as the analysis also elevates intertextual references over any expectation of faithfulness.

[88] Adaptation scholar Thomas Leitch frames this discussion around adaptation and Bakhtin as an opportunity for a "reconfigured discipline." He proposes a new series of questions for adaptation scholarship: "How has a given adaptation rewritten its sourcetext? Why has it chose to select and rewrite the sourcetexts it has? How have the texts available to us inevitably been rewritten by the very act of reading? and How do we want to rewrite them anew?" (332)

simultaneity – a recognition of two things at once" (71-2, 84). In other words, while Bakhtin demonstrates how novels are constantly in an interrelated dialogue with other texts, Cutchins expands to posit that adaptations are a distinct acknowledgement of such a connected dialogue between various texts (74-5, 85). Fidelity therefore becomes "an illusion" as social expectations take priority; the adaptation reflects a particular understanding of a story for an audience, which remains in conversation with other narratives and alternate possible meanings (76, 78-9).[89] No single work is an absolute truth or inspiration for an adaptation. Fidelity is too simple, a literary constraint. A literary dialogue is instead determined by interrelationships and "a simultaneity of thought" about a story and its purpose (72).[90]

Native Son as a prominent American narrative, in all of its different interpretations, operates as an excellent case study for the importance of adaptations within the context of simultaneity instead of fidelity. All *Native Son* adaptations have struggled with expectations of perceived fidelity, including the two adaptations where Wright was directly involved. Bigger is often perceived as simply unadaptable as written, and adaptations are placed either in the position of reaching for a perfect recreation (and failing at this attempt) or the position of adjusting for previous political and social concerns found within the novel (and also failing at this prospect).[91] Just take the

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[89] Cutchins here echoes Linda Hutcheon's famous concept of the palimpsest as a metaphor for adaptation because multiple meanings are communicated within a created dialogue (81).

[90] As another way to understand this idea, a single narrative can never be a whole alone. Instead, one work is a fragment ready "to seek each other out," so an adaptation cannot be reduced to an inferior copy but instead a piece of the overall literary conversation (Cutchins 72-3).

[91] Although I do not agree with Page Laws' concept of a "contract" in connection with adaptation studies, I note here the concept of "fascinating failures" or "flawed" failures

responses to three different *Native Son* adaptations from very different historical moments – the 1951 film, the 1986 film, and the 2014 play. The 1951 film starred Richard Wright himself as Bigger Thomas, but the actual work, eventually completed in Argentina, had serious production and fidelity issues: all references to left-wing politics were eliminated, along with the majority of the court proceedings; Wright was viewed as "twenty years too old, thirty pounds overweight, and totally inexperienced as an actor" by even his most sympathetic friends; and early propositions from Hollywood investors suggested ideas such as a musical version for the screen or the protagonist as instead "an oppressed minority white man," a suggestion met by Wright with "uproarious laughter of disbelief" (Pyros 53-4, Cripps 425, qtd. in Laws 27).[92] Wright's portrayal was contemporaneously reviewed in *The New York Times* as "surface" and the narrative as "reduced" for the film format ("The Screen"). Only a censored version was released to

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for the 1951 film and the 1986 film adaptations. Laws specifically considers the erasure of Bessie's death from the 1986 film as a "deal-breaker" for the narrative because it portrays "a change so contrary to the essence of the original that is violates the implicit three-way contract between the original author, his adaptor, and the readers and viewers" (32). As discussed later in this chapter, a similar change is made to the 2019 film adaptation, but I argue that this change signifies the complex influences of simultaneous engagements, not a broken contract with only Wright's novel. The contract idea therefore retains too much of a fidelity stipulation to correlate with this chapter's arguments, although I recognize the value of Laws' approach in connection to adaptational changes, intentionality, and homage.

[92] John Pyros explains these concerns in his article "Richard Wright: A Black Novelist's Experience in Film": "Inasmuch as Wright was a man of great artistic integrity and as the suggested plot changes were totally absurd, Wright had no recourse but to refuse [the suggested alterations about Communism and Bigger's race]. After all, the novel's plot concerns itself with a Black man, his experiences as a man oppressed by racism, and his gradual awakening through rather sympathetic whites and Communists; finally, a murder was a theme too powerful, too deeply felt for Wright to allow some financial pimp to hustle it down the shabby stretches of Hollywood and Slime Streets." But even as Wright's integrity is recognized, his desire to control the narrative also shaped that particular adaptation. The movie was a "filmic fiasco" because of Hollywood's racism, Wright's vanity, and inferior production opportunities altogether (53-4).

American audiences due to continued concerns about political messaging (Hoberman). The 1986 film suffered accusations of "sentimentalism" in opposition to Wright's harsher intentions (Kehr), with particular frustration directed toward the omission of Bessie's murder because the morality subsequently became oversimplified. Bessie's death in the novel, some critics contended, erases the ability for audiences to pity Bigger for Mary's accidental death, while this adaptation erroneously edges toward a sympathetic portrayal over a brutal protagonist (Harmetz): "To have made him something else – a vulnerable victim whose only crime is living in [B]lack Chicago – is to let slip an opportunity to make clear Bigger's own pre-political rage" (Cripps 427). Likewise, the 2014 play skips the court drama of the novel's final section altogether, which is simultaneously viewed as an attempt to adjust for the "primary flaw" of increased didacticism in the novel's court scenes as well as a missed opportunity to dramatize the racist American legal system (Tusler 299). By focusing on Bigger's humanity and interiority, the political commentary is perceived as diminished due to a focus "on a flawed individual instead of a flawed institution" (300-1). In other words, the play fails because it makes changes, but it also made those exact changes in order to address previous complaints.[93] The adaptations remain caught in a loop. It is impossible to exactly recreate the original novel, and it is impossible to address all of the levied desires and complaints. A *Native Son* adaptation is never considered faithful to the novel, and it is never quite reaching the political commentary desired by any new viewers. But why not?

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[93] In another review, the play is called theatrical in its presentation but "smaller" in its implications due to these changes (Soloski).

As Thomas Cripps writes in his response to the 1986 film, "If Wright could not fill the political void left by his own shifting politics [via the 1951 film version], a team of filmmakers bent on keeping faith with a classic [piece of American literature] and purveying it to a broad, profitable audience could hardly be expected to improve on the master" in their own version (426). But how limiting is that potential conversation, when even Wright can be considered unfaithful to his own work? What questions can even still be asked, when Wright outright stated that "[i]f the film is bad, it's all [his] fault" because he wrote the dialogue himself (Hoberman)? Or, as another example, the 1941 play, also co-written by Wright, is often reduced to a controversy between "a successful Black intellectual and a white Southern writer of progressive reputation" in Paul Green after a contentious writing process (Green and Wright 25). Should all of the controversy then be attributed to Green as the new writer? Did Wright fail again? Or did famed director Orson Welles just not understand the story's intent?[94] These questions are the wrong focus, as little is gained from a rigid attachment to fidelity. Instead of such a circular discourse, the concept of simultaneity within adaptation studies allows for a rejection of singular political expectations and direct faithfulness to an original version. A new question therefore surfaces: Why should anyone focus on "keeping faith" to the novel alone as a primary goal when instead its simultaneous influences can be

[94] Green and Wright disagreed about the play's overall narrative from the start, although Wright worried about speaking against Green due to the spectacle of a public disagreement (Green and Wright 24-5). Wright ended with a Bigger accepting of his fate, while Green envisioned Bigger fantasizing himself as God-like (25). While rewrites did occur without Green's approval, some of his intentions remain in the play, such as this line from Bigger in Scene Six: "[…] and the big churches and the bells ringing and the millionaires walking in and out bowing low before their God – Hunh-huh. It ain't God now, it's Bigger. Bigger, that's my name" (48).

interrogated? A fruitful conversation may emerge instead from the links between all possible narratives, with *Native Son* as an ideal narrative to study due to its contentious history.

As previously outlined in this project, didactic American literature struggles with conversations of sanctioned quality overall, and Wright's infamous work follows suit especially in critical reception. Any direct adaptations suffer a similar fate. But in a revived conversation centered on simultaneity, it is not that *Native Son* adaptations fail at the so-called original message, or that even *Native Son* originally failed as American literature due to its political didacticism. Instead, this chapter argues that *Native Son* evolves each time the story is evoked, transformed, and revived – never the same, and never perfect in its execution, but always circling the vital protest against structural racism in the United States again and again. Politics may adjust, but the protest against racism remains throughout these powerful, simultaneous engagements – with the original novel, with other adaptations, and even with the debates constructed around Bigger Thomas' role in American literature by the likes of James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. And while all of the *Native Son* narratives are relevant in this discussion of simultaneity, the 2019 film adaptation vitally emerges as the most conscious execution of this theoretical approach and its overall effectiveness for didactic political literature, a point that echoes the increased representation of political didacticism in the 21st century.

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The 2019 *Native Son* film, directed by conceptual post-Black artist Rashid Johnson and written by Pulitzer-Prize winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, tells a 21st century version of the classic novel set in Chicago, Illinois. The film was an official Sundance

Film Festival selection and released to the public on *HBOMax*. This adaptation's Bigger Thomas (Ashton Sanders) – known to his friends as Big – has green hair and a leather jacket, and he narrates multiple voiceovers about his limitations in life due to race and class restrictions. When he is hired by the affluent Daltons as a chauffeur, he becomes entangled in a complicated world due to his time with the Dalton's daughter, Mary (Margaret Qualley), and her radical leftist boyfriend, Jan (Nick Robinson). Just like Wright's Bigger, this job ultimately changes the course of his life forever, even if his ultimate fate differs from his literary predecessor's conclusion.

Johnson's version of *Native Son* portrays how race and class "rob young Black men of their choices," especially in relation to self-perception; it also embraces the question of change between the novel's publication date and the film's release date, as Johnson believes such overlapping challenges are "always a good reason to tell that kind of story" (B. Davis). As an adaptation, the film functions as an act of discourse, motivated in this case by political concerns both past and present (Andrew 37). This updated Big is more educated, more conscious of his economic limitations, and more emotionally connected to others (McWilliams). Modified for a contemporary setting, Mary's Communist boyfriend Jan is now associated with the Occupy movement, even as the social anxiety for a Black man in America "kind of" remains the same (Del Barco). The film received general acknowledgement and even outright praise for its deviations from Wright's novel (Giorgis, McWilliams). However, the film is still criticized for its lacking character interiority, and the revised ending – Big's death by police shooting instead of his death sentence after a legal conviction for a white woman's death – is described as "neither heartbreaking nor particularly revelatory, but painful to watch nonetheless" because the

storytelling remains “superficial” and an overall “disappointment” (Giorgis). As its highest praise, one review declares that this adaptation “has reached the limit of what the text [*Native Son*] has left to offer” – a valiant effort that ultimately fails because it exhibits “a didacticism that Wright would admire” (Patterson). Overall, these criticism ring similarly to the previous criticisms of *Native Son* adaptations: it cannot overcome the original failings of the historically valuable work, and it also cannot seem to capture the power of the original novel’s message. It is stuck in the loop – but only if fidelity remains the primary lens for interrogation.

So while it is not required to know a previous work in order to engage with an adaptation, this examination will start with a foundation on Wright and his novel *Native Son,* as well as the other adaptations and literary debates around that text, because the 2019 film embraces such simultaneous conversations. A political protest novel about the human condition and the cost of submission for Black Americans, Wright’s *Native Son* focuses not on exonerating its protagonist Bigger Thomas but instead on condemning the conditions that create men like Bigger as a product of “racism and oppression” in the United States (Cronin 104, 108, 115). Wright does not ignore American history but insists that “history can be a punishment” (Howe, “Black”). Bigger was a very different kind of protagonist for American literature in the 20th century, a rare recognition of violent anger in response to racism without an adjustment to expected American morality by the work’s conclusion (Jackson 115).[95] Wright’s protagonist is burdened by racist structures, and his characterization is framed by the perceptions of others – even as he is

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[95] Jackson notes that author Charles Himes was the only other American author to make such a literary attempt (115).

guilty of the accused crimes. He experiences an “old feeling, the feeling that he had had all his life: he was [B]lack and had done wrong; white men […] would soon accuse him” (Wright, *Native* 153). Political novels such as Sinclair’s *The Jungle* may be remembered as influential toward direct action by American politicians,[96] but Wright’s *Native Son* successfully engaged with public political perceptions of race relations on a scale possibly not seen since Frederick Douglass’ powerful slave narrative in 1845:

> Finally [since potentially *Narrative*], a book had emerged that accomplished in the field of the public sphere the work that needed to be done. Wright’s greatest asset lay in the fact that he did not subsist on an aesthetic diet of art alone, nor did he operate as only a skilled propagandist who titillated the middle class or the Left. He laid broad claim to the field of American public life. At bottom, *Native Son* introduced the spirit of transformation to American cultural politics. (Jackson 122)

All didactic political novels analyze the ills of social norms and persist in “truth-telling aims” (Kostelanetz 5). Wright’s work – “never frivolous nor capricious, but belabored, didactic, and filled with Wright’s feverish imaginings, his slightly bizarre sense of drama” – absolutely illustrates that aim, even as the work remains controversial because of its political intentions (Jackson 196).

Similar to fellow author John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, Wright wanted his “big” political novel to be a difficult reality check for wealthy white readers, although in his case a rude awakening to the racism present in the American North during the early 20th century (Cohen 93). Wright was a “hard-edged writer of political protest” and a “preeminent social critic” of the 20th century, and *Native Son* altered the social and

[96] As previously discussed in the first chapter, Sinclair’s work may be known for its political influence on the meatpacking industry, but his actual intent for *The Jungle* – the spread of socialism within the working class – was not realized.

literary sensibilities of many contemporaneous readers (Carpio 1, Kinnamon 24). As literary critic and personal friend Saunders Redding said, "Dick [Wright] did burn with zeal, but it was always for a cause, and he tended to be chary and a little suspicious of people who didn't. He never seemed to believe that an attitude toward life that was lighted by faintest ray of hedonism could be quite real and legitimate. The gods within him were saturnine, gloomy, of tragic bent" (Hill 211). Wright's positive perceptions evolved from his negative experiences, which created that "gloomy" atmosphere in his writing. But this struggle throughout his career, from his youth in the American South and his time in Northern cities like Chicago to his experiences with Communism and his eventual expatriation, expose a political theme about the perils of isolation and lacking political motivation for any individual human, *Native Son* included (Kostelanetz 105).

Native Son was a "blockbuster novel" at its release, setting records with 200,000 copies sold in just three weeks (Jackson 117-8). His success demonstrated the space for a commercially viable African American literature outside of previous stereotypes and cliches, literature with deep psychological portraits about "[B]lack defiance and hostility toward malevolent white oppression" (159, 109). The story was inspired by the trial of Robert Nixon, an eighteen-year-old Black man charged with the rape and murder of a white woman. He was compared to a "jungle beast" in newspaper headlines prior to his execution, his humanity fully removed in light of his crimes (108). Wright's protagonist was a similar product of a "dislocated society," according to his essay "How Bigger was Born," and subsequently Bigger was "a dispossessed and disinherited man" seeking a way out of his current situation (521-2). Wright's narrative was a significant risk at the time, as he introduced a young Black protagonist who kills two women yet remains the

central focus of a serious novel without any release of humor for his readers (Jackson 114). Bigger was something different – purposefully different in order to extrapolate the circumstances of his creation.

Wright's commercial and critical success made him a giant of leftist literature in the United States, which also made him a prime target for criticism during a postwar time of "devaluation of protest literature" (Mills 58).[97] Social protest works at the time were generally "cast out" as literary realism by critics, with *Native Son* as a final publication exhausting any literary possibilities within "an intellectual climate that had grown suspicious of social realism" (Jackson 8, 336).[98] His emergence as a writer was tied to his discovery of Communism, and he joined a community of radical writers and artists as a surrogate family with "a political ideology he could believe in" (Cohen 169, 70). *Native Son*'s narrative exposed the connections between race-based oppression and class-based oppression with realistic precision. His Communist characters, likewise, struggled in

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[97] Mills also argues that Wright's political writing "does not function as didactic exhortation removed from the particularities of African American realities" but instead as a "Marxist aesthetic attuned to the cultural resources and political capacities of African Americans" (59). I agree that Wright considers the political potential of Communism for Black Americans, but I do not grant that didacticism is removed from social realities. I instead argue that Wright's work can have didactic elements even as it also embraces a particular aesthetic.

[98] To clarify, other American authors continued to write about leftist concerns within their creative works, such as Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun*. In some ways, Hansberry's work can be viewed as a type of "sequel" to Wright's *Native Son,* and the playwright herself overtly called her work political – "actively so" (Jackson 488). However, public perception of the play did not echo Hansberry's claims, and this divergence is the key difference between *Native Son*'s reception and political literature published later in the 20th century: "The newspapers and critics would emphasize Hansberry's commitment to artistic standards and disconnect her from more radical politics of social change, a pursuit joined to the inept craftsman. She would be presented to the public as the antidote, the [B]lack writer who possessed a refinement and marketability that the provincial [B]lack artists lacked" (492).

solidarity with the downtrodden in an attempt to bring about social change, although importantly Wright did not completely agree with the politics of his politically outspoken characters (Carpio 8, Afflerbach 96).[99] In essence, his political influences are present in the work to show how Marxism can enable progress yet he does not ensure progress nor provide any specific roadmap for success (Mills 67). This distinction shows a clear difference between a didactic political novel such as *Native Son* and the previously discussed utopian novel *Look Backward* by Edward Bellamy; the novel engages with political content without diverging into future plans or political grandstanding beyond the focus of the narrative itself.

Wright did eventually fall out with the Communist Party because he saw his role as a writer only, not as an element of on-the-ground recruitment via work like petitions as the leadership desired; he also became increasingly frustrated by 1941 with their refusal to support Black-organized protests for civil rights (Cohen 72, 313).[100] By the time of

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[99] Afflerbach outlines how many scholars equate the political speeches of Wright's lawyer character Boris Max with Wright himself, but this simplification is inaccurate. Max's defense is not "the author's political judgement of Bigger," even if that reading allows critics to rebuke the Communist content of the novel without further engagement (96). In fact, the racist prosecutor Buckley connects Max and Bigger to the Communist Party more than Max himself does, especially as Max focuses on the need for "collective reform" instead of any stated policy positions (97-8, 100). However, Nathanial Mills adds that Communist characters Jan and Max are some of the only characters to grant Bigger subjectivity and agency in the novel, which could add to the previously outlined perception by literary critics (70).

[100] Cohen further details this eventual disillusionment in *The Pull of Politics*: "And for Wright, the Party that had once given him his start as a writer through its Chicago John Reed Club and offered hope for his people now lost both of these appeals by 1941. He had achieved literary success on his own, and the Party seemed to turn its back on the welfare of African Americans when it refused to support the black-organized march on Washington planned for July 1941 and further refused to fight discrimination in the war industries and segregation in the U.S. military." And so, Wright eventually cut his connections with the Communist Party (313-4).

Native Son's publication, he also planned to write less for the Communist Party priorities or fellow "[B]lack constituents" because he principally wanted to reach an uninformed white audience nationwide (Cohen 93, Jackson 109).[101] He had a new goal in mind with his most famous work, and his protagonist Bigger "was more important than what any person, white or [B]lack, would say or try to make of him, more important than any political analysis designed to explain or deny him, more important, even than [Wright's] own sense of fear, shame, and diffidence" (Wright, "How" 526). His goal became less about appealing to any audience with a positive portrayal and more about a harsh confrontation with an "unpalatable truth" in order to force a reexamination of biases, an exploration of America's racist social structures not realized since Charles Chesnutt's *Marrow of Tradition* (Kinnamon 19, Jackson 115).[102] Interestingly, Chesnutt's novel was unpopular with the wider American audience, while Wright's work was an unprecedented success. But that success would face criticism shortly at the hands of fellow Black American authors, criticism that continues to shape perception of *Native Son* into the 21st century.

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In recognition of being two things at once – a truly simultaneous adaptation – the 2019 film reckons not only with the continued legacy of racism and classism in the United States nor with simply Wright's identity as an author of protest fiction; it also

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[101] Wright received general praise from the left and Black readers for *Uncle Tom's Children,* but he also remarked on his frustration with reception because white liberals missed his intentions (Jackson 109).

[102] To clarify, however, Wright's work was not only consumed by white wealthy readers. Young Black readers used *Native Son* as momentum toward political organization as well because they sought leftist politics and rejected the injustice of segregation (Jackson 119).

responds to famous criticisms and comparisons in connection to the *Native Son* narrative after its release. The primary complaint against Bigger's representation in *Native Son* revolves around his characterization as "too depraved a monster," a reinforcement of harmful stereotypes about Black men as violent rapists without discernible humanity (Cronin 106). Bigger is an inherently limited character, and Robyn Wiegman elaborates to claim Bigger's representation as "our literature's most compelling story of the [B]lack man caught in the mythology of the rapist" (100). But while Bigger's characterization can be understood as political commentary, the novel is also denounced generally as a piece of diminished, didactic protest fiction. Any depictions of oppression and racism ultimately overshadow Wright's commentary toward social change from this perspective (McAlear 111). In the latter half of the 20th century, literary criticisms of *Native Son* most often build from responses by fellow Black authors James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, and the 2019 film directly references these conversations as moments of simultaneity throughout the film. These references are not minor points of context for a knowing audience; they are conscious connective tissue to understand how this adaptation's version of Bigger ultimately comes into existence. *The Atlantic*'s review for the film, for example, was titled "*Native Son* Gets the James Baldwin Edit" because the film engages with Baldwin's critical essays; additionally, interviews with director Rashid Johnson directly address the film's opening scene because it includes a brief shot of Ellison's *Invisible Man* on top of Bigger's bed (McWilliams, B. Davis). Literary references such as the *Invisible Man* text are meant to illustrate this version of Bigger and his state of

mind.[103] As Johnson explains, "The books may not be the focus of every frame but it gives [the audience] insight into Bigger's perspective." The script is perceived as filtered through a "Baldwinian lens," an adaptation clearly aware of the story's contentious history and politically charged past (McWilliams). Therefore, a full analysis of the film's simultaneous influences must incorporate an understanding of Baldwin, Ellison, their literary criticisms, and their own fictional writings.

Baldwin's criticism tends to dominate contemporary discussion about *Native Son*, and his scathing remarks influence perceptions about the novel as well as Wright's overall legacy within the American canon.[104] Baldwin launched his own literary career with his essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" in 1948 by dismissing *Native Son* as a limited and reductive protest novel both due to its representation of Bigger Thomas and its leftist intentions toward social change (Rampersad xxvii).[105] Baldwin seeks to separate literature and sociology – a clear criticism of didacticism in literary works – and asserts that the protest novel generally fails as a literary form because it is alternatively functioning as propaganda (Charney 69). Protest novels are necessarily limited in Baldwin's view because they have subordinated art to ideological concerns, and Baldwin

[103] Other literary references are included in the film, although the *Invisible Man* book is the text most emphasized by its early inclusion as well as its discussion via interviews. For one example, several American classics are scanned on a bookshelf in the Dalton house that Big peruses toward the middle of the film, with a first edition of Wright's *Native Son* included. For another, Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* sits on Bigger's bed at the Dalton's home during a later scene (*Native,* Johnson 0:44:53, 1:17:41).
[104] According to Jackson, Wright's reputation took a serious hit in the United States after Baldwin's essay, even though he remained the most recognizable African American author in the Western world at the time of his death (503).
[105] Interestingly, academic criticism accepted Baldwin's argument so fully that critical focus shifted from *Native Son* as a protest novel to *Native Son* as a character study about lost humanity after the publication of "Everybody's Protest Novel" (Afflerbach 103).

rejects Wright's problematic protagonist as "only part of a larger reality" (70-1, 73). "The failure of the protest novel," Baldwin famously concludes, "lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended" (Baldwin 23). No matter the intended rhetoric from this viewpoint, protest novels consign political problems to "an impersonal social arena" in a comfortable manner for any distanced readers; the novels therefore are "anesthetizing" the very topics that the authors intend to uncover (Ramadanovic 87). Readers take comfort in the crafted distance from any fictional spaces produced in these works, with all social concerns cleanly separated from the horrors of lived experiences (Baldwin 19). Since the publication of Baldwin's criticism, Bigger Thomas has grown to encapsulate a dehumanizing portrayal of Black male characters in American fiction– a pitiable yet horrific descendent of Uncle Tom himself (McAlear 120, Baldwin 22).

Wright's novel became centered around a constant discussion of his social representations and their perceived accuracy, and he did not take this criticism well (Jackson 247). He felt "deliberately" misread by Baldwin, especially because Bigger was not meant to be representative of Black America in its entirety but instead as a staggering reconsideration for white readers about racist presumptions (Jackson 288, McAlear 120).[106] Wright expressed to Baldwin that "all literature is protest" – although he also clarified that direct propaganda was unacceptable – and he argued that Bigger's story demonstrated how the systemic oppression of American citizens creates such a guilty

[106] Wright also specifically disliked that Baldwin claimed his work was improbable, as he had deliberately based his story around the previously referenced news accounts (Jackson 288).

character (McAlear 115, 118). As Wright outlines in his own essay "How Bigger Was Born," Bigger is not meant to somehow represent all aspects of all Black Americans. He encapsulates a specific violence engendered by the limitations of 20th century life in the United States due to racist structures:

> Above and beyond all this, there was that American part of Bigger which is the heritage of us all, that part of him which we get from our seeing and hearing, from school, from the hopes and dreams of our friends; that part of him which the common people of America never talk of but take for granted. Among millions of people the deepest convictions of life are never discussed openly; they are felt, implied, hinted at tacitly and obliquely in their hopes and fears. We live by an idealism that makes us believe that the Constitution is a good document of government, that the Bill of Rights is a good legal and humane principle to safeguard our civil liberties, that every man and woman should have the opportunity to realize himself, to seek his own individual fate and goal, his own peculiar and untranslatable destiny. […] Bigger had all of this in him, dammed up, buried, implied, and I had to develop it in fictional form. (527-8)

The character Bigger is "caught," as Wright proclaims, by his inability to achieve any opportunity, to grasp at any of that "idealism" associated with American narratives. As detailed early in the novel, Bigger's life is seized in a rhythm of "indifference and violence; periods of abstract brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and moments of anger – like water ebbing and flowing from the tug of a far-away, invisible force" (Wright, *Native* 31). Bigger is deliberately a problematic, violent, unbalanced figure because he represents the failures of the United States as an idealistic nation, of a racist and classist system which engenders dehumanized Black men and therefore must be changed. *Native Son* is meant as a story about an alienated protagonist and the consequences of his struggle and despair (McParland 59). And so while Baldwin is certainly correct that harmful stereotypes are reproduced by the character of Bigger Thomas, and he is also right to assert that protest fiction cannot be the complete answer

to all social ills, he belies Wright's literary creation in his criticism. Wright's didactic protest novel does not reject "the human being" in its pages; it endorses the restoration of Black men's humanity even as American society fails to do so. *Native Son* does not so much reject the human being with a character such as Bigger as it recognizes how such men have been created by America's perpetually inaccessible, broken promises.

As an extension of these criticisms from Baldwin, fellow Black writer Ralph Ellison similarly distances himself from Wright's literary legacy. In many ways, Ellison appears as the natural successor to Wright because his writings engage with similar themes about politics and African American culture (Kostelanetz 107). Ellison can even appear to comment on his predecessor's writing with his own fiction, as Ellison's narrator in *Invisible Man* similarly struggles with a sense of identity and reacts in a more passive manner (108). But Ellison strongly puts forward his own identity "beyond the Wrightian social protest" novel in his critical essays, and his fictional protagonist struggles with self-deception more than Wright's Bigger ever does (Kinnamon 24, Kostelanetz 108). He does not see Wright as an influence (Ellison, "The World" 139-41). He emphasizes literary writing over didactic writing. And his fiction reinterprets the American canon and expectations of the American novel by destabilizing traditional presumptions, in particular with powerful allusions toward previous literary traditions (Nadel 17).[107] In his

[107] Alan Nadel's crucial criticism of *Invisible Man, Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon,* interrogates Ellison's use of allusion to "destabilized traditional presumptions" about the literary canon (xii). In compelling ways, Nadel's work with allusion overlaps with some interventions in adaptation studies, such as the recognition of T.S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and the idea of reconsideration for an original text via allusion as a "flux of rearrangement" (29, 42, 57). Nadel also references the parallels of allusion to the concept of simultaneity (45). Adaptation studies typically works on a larger scale than allusion, however, so this connection is recognized even as adaptation scholarship remains the focus for this research.

introduction to *Invisible Man,* Ellison seeks to reveal "human complexity which stereotypes are intended to conceal" (xxii) – a statement that seems to reverberate with the critical commentary from Baldwin's infamous essay against Wright's infamous character. His literary intentions are meant to seem disparate from Wright's works overall and *Native Son* in particular.

Ellison's most remarkable conversation over Wright's *Native Son* revolves around his debate with literary critic Irving Howe. Howe wrote his essay "Black Boys and Native Sons" as a defense for Wright's "committed" writing; in particular, he responded to the decline of Wright's reputation over time due to Baldwin's attack, Ellison's disavowal, and overall shifting literary expectations into the latter half of the 20th century (Wellington 104). Boldly, Howe states that "American culture was changed forever" by the publication of *Native Son* ("Black"). He believes that Wright maintained his "integrity" while including thematic protest in his fiction, even as he recognizes the imperfections of the novel itself (Wellington 103, 105). Despite later efforts at "qualifying" certain aspects of the work, Wright's novel importantly uncovers the "hatred, fear and violence" present in American culture from Howe's perspective: "That *Native Son* has grave faults anyone can see. […] Yet it should be said that the endlessly repeated criticism that Wright caps his melodrama with a party-line oration tends to oversimplify the novel, for Wright is too honest simply to allow the propagandistic message to constitute the last word." As the key incitement for their eventual debate, Howe also names Baldwin and Ellison specifically in his essay as only able to write as they did because Wright "had been there first, courageous enough to release the full weight of his anger" ("Black"). Ellison fiercely disagreed.

Ellison argued back furiously in his essay “The World and the Jug” against Howe’s implications about both his own work as well as African American literature overall. He contends that African American authors should not have a prescription for possible literary topics, nor any obligation placed upon them to write social protest literature in the same vein as Wright (Kuryla 10, 12): “Wright believed in the much abused idea that novels are ‘weapons’ – the counterpart of the dreary notion, common among most minority groups, that novels are instruments of good public relations. But I believe that true novels, even when most pessimistic and bitter, […] preserve as they destroy, affirm as they reject” (Ellison, “The World” 114). Ellison also upholds that Black writers must maintain creative autonomy, an ability severely limited by Howe’s proposed expectations in Ellison’s view (Wellington 105). Ellison was overall insulted by Howe’s insinuations, especially his claims that Ellison rejected protest literature as a “fashionable” choice instead of a personal perspective (Kuryla 12). He did reject Bigger as a “final image” of an African American man in the public perception, but he also sought to write a different kind of novel as the century progressed (Ellison, “The World” 118). In the end, Ellison won the debate, while Howe was recognized for his “bold defense” of Wright within the academic community (Nowlin 117).

What remains vital to remember about Ellison’s perspective on Wright, however, is its complexity. In his 1945 essay “Richard Wright’s Blues,” Ellison then wrote about Wright’s dual role to depict the African American experience and the psychological tensions due to racism in the United States (61). He labels Wright’s most important achievement as his influence on other Black Americans to “confront the world” and “throw his findings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America” (74). Yet while

Ellison seemingly respects Wright for his work, even in his later essays, he does not see him as an influence on his own writing; he also describes him as a lesser writer compared to a Hemingway or an Eliot within the American canon ("The World," 139-41).[108] Ellison elevates literary writing over didactic writing consistently, which does follow the trend of the progressing 20th century. Much of Wright's writing therefore automatically does not fit his expectations. And while Howe is right to support a place for "committed" writing, Ellison is also correct that minority writers should not be expected to fit certain themes or expectations with their writings in order to educate white, wealthy readers.

This described tension, an imperfect space left for any didactic political writing, is vitally tied to the dual expectations for *Native Son* as political literature. Any adaptation of *Native Son* – from Wright's own film and play adaptation to the most recent 2019 film – enters into a conversation about representations of Bigger Thomas as problematic, intentions of didactic protest literature as limited, and constructions of political narratives about racism as ineffective. So instead of attempting to recreate the same work, this newest *Native Son* has embraced all of these conversations together. It recognizes the power of Baldwinian criticism, the influence of Ellison's more literary *Invisible Man,* the reception of previous adaptations, and the contemporaneous horror of police brutality in the United States. The result remains imperfect, just like all previous incarnations of *Native Son.* The result also demands a space for didactic political writing in the 21st century as revitalized, recontextualized, and outspoken – just like authors such as Sinclair, London, and Wright decades ago.

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[108] Ellison also became less vocal about race and politics in his later years, which Jackson attributes to his success in predominantly white literary circles (480).

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The most telling moments of simultaneity in Johnson's *Native Son* are demonstrated by two explicit rewritings of Wright's novel: the very start of the film and the very end of the film. These deliberate deviations represent not only adaptational changes but also recognizable and meaningful conversations with other texts. To start, the opening scene argues for a very different kind of Bigger Thomas from Wright's version in the 20th century. The novel's Bigger, as Wright acknowledges, is aware of his limitations primarily on a subconscious level. That Bigger would not be able to describe his own oppression or importantly want to consciously think about the systemic structures containing him. "His emotional and intellectual life," as Wright states, "was never that articulate" even if he "intuitively" understood due to the "mental and emotional climate" of his time ("How," 527-8). But that Bigger was also criticized for his characterization, and the political context has shifted significantly by the film adaptation's release date. So how can the film demonstrate that its version of Bigger is a conscious character, one not just intuitively aware but deliberately aware? Well, the film decides to wake Big up and open his eyes.

Blindness or closed eyes as a metaphor in Wright's *Native Son* is a constantly developing theme. The oppression of systemic racism in the United States is represented by how someone can – or cannot – see, as well as how someone can be blinded by social realities. The novel's racism then becomes "something that blinds not only the person seeing but also the person being seen" (McAlear 114-5). Maurice Wallace vitally outlines this blindness in his examination of Black male embodiment, as Bigger Thomas represents how Black men are "prejudicially seen" by white Americans (7-8, 21). With

his concept of spectragraphia, what he describes as "the iconic *simultaneity* of the spectral and the spectacular in racialist representation of [B]lack men," Bigger is viewed within the "imperfect – indeed illusory – cultural vision" of his contemporaneous society, and that vision comes to impact his perception of himself (30-1, emphasis added). Wright's Bigger is already two things at once as argued by this analysis, both overly embodied by his masculine frame and rendered invisible due to his race, and he is left with "no mode for survival" before he actually takes any of his famously violent actions (44). He only has a restricted list of representational possibilities, a limitation most often explored in his damning scene with Mary's blind mother as he suffocates Mary under her own pillow (29, 135). Mrs. Dalton's appearance causes Bigger to murder Mary in a moment of panic, as he hopes to silence the daughter and thereby keep the mother unaware of his presence. Importantly, however, this reaction occurs because the white woman's physical blindness does not stop her from "seeing" Bigger in his Black male body framed via a biased social perception. He becomes "a flesh-and-blood fiction of the white imagination," reduced to "a sexual brute, a hungry rapist, a bad —-" without humanity (38). The version of Bigger seen in this simultaneous state is incriminated and diminished, a man arrested "in body and being well before the Chicago police take him into their custody" due to this visual perception (37, 135). Mrs. Dalton's blindness is the literal manifestation of Bigger's lived reality – a blindness projected onto him by others and a blindness internalized about himself.

Although the scene of Mary's death is the most telling moment connecting blindness and social vision, Wright's *Native Son* also starts with an unseeing Bigger – although this Bigger is instead asleep. During the first moments of the novel, Bigger is awoken by the

emphasized ringing of his alarm clock alongside loud calls from his mother. The first line, a capitalized and extended “BRRRRRRRIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIINNG!” from the alarm, sharply seems to awaken Bigger and his family along with the reading audience. All individuals are meant to open their eyes at this point, and Wright’s story can therefore begin. The alarm clock has “clanged in the [previously] dark and silent room,” and Bigger’s mother calls out impatiently for Bigger to “shut that thing off!” and “turn on the light” as everyone proceeds to rise from bed. Bigger’s prior state – sleeping with shut eyes – is emphasized by his action of rubbing his face as he floods the room with light (1). Bigger has been asleep, and his eyes have been closed. He has not been seeing the world around him prior to this opening scene – in many ways, the first moment of blindness or visual distinction within Wright’s novel. In other words, Bigger starts in the dark, not seeing or consciously understanding his current social situation. And importantly, Bigger may be aware of certain limitations, such as his powerlessness to help his family or himself, but he chooses to stay blind to this reality because it will sweep him away otherwise: “He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. […] He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So, he denied himself and acted tough” (9). The alarm may ring to wake him, and the light may flood the space around him, but Wright’s Bigger purposefully does not listen or see. He stays encapsulated in his blindness because he cannot let himself do otherwise. The alarm may ring, but the blindness persists at this moment.

This blindness does not erase Bigger's rage, however, and his tendency toward violence is also demonstrated in the opening pages by the death of the black rat. Just as they all rise for the morning, a large black rat can be heard within the thin walls of their building. Bigger's mother begins to yell for Bigger to kill the rat with a skillet, this time out of fear toward rat bites (2-3). The rat "squeal[s] and leap[s] at Bigger's trouser-leg and snag[s] it in his teeth, hanging on" until Bigger flings it against the wall. After an extended scuffle, the rat attempts to find a safe hole in the wall, but Bigger finally catches it with "a shattering of wood" as the rat's hiding spot caves in from the skillet. Once discovered, "the flat body of the rat [is] exposed, its two long yellow tusks showing distinctly." Bigger then confirms the rat's death by beating its head with a shoe, "crushing it, cursing hysterically" (3-4). He proudly admires his efforts with his younger brother and enjoys swinging the dead rat's body toward his crying sister before he disposes of the animal's dead body in a back alley (5-6). Vitally for this scene, Bigger's violence is enforced upon a body framed very much like his own in later scenes. It is terribly easy to rationalize his initial actions because he needs to protect his family – and himself – from potential rat bites and contagious diseases. But Bigger is less justified in his later actions, especially as he remains blind to the fear emanating from the animal. He increases the violence against the rat's body by striking its head with his shoe, and he feels a distance from the rat's death as shown by his engagements with his siblings. This scene comes to stand in as the violence later taken upon Bigger's body as a Black man in the novel, a point reinforced by Bigger's wistful reaction to another black rat hiding in a hole for safety as Bigger runs from the police at the novel's climax (288). The black rat is blindly viewed as violent and vicious by others, with descriptions by Wright emphasizing

the rat's yellow teeth and beady eyes. Bigger's mother even sees the rat with her own "round eyes" filled by "fascinated horror," a foreshadowing of the exact framing Wallace describes for Mrs. Dalton's "view" of Bigger as her daughter Mary dies before her unseeing eyes (2).

With both the alarm clock and the black rat in mind, the first five minutes of the 2019 *Native Son* film can be understood to fully embrace the concept of simultaneity as an adaptation, influenced in particular by the contentious debates surrounding Wright's characterization. In effect, this Big is not the same character as Wright's Bigger before him. This film starts with the light sound of twittering birds, not a ringing alarm, and Big's voiceover tells the audience that he doesn't "need an alarm clock to wake [him] up." The first shot of Big does not show him asleep but awake and already dressed for the day, smoking with his apartment window open as he looks out at the relatively quiet Chicago morning. He sits on his bed, rubbing his hands on his pants, before he takes a handgun out from under his mattress. He then places that gun with a slight clatter onto a copy of Ellison's *Invisible Man* and a personal notebook. As he sits, he looks up just beyond the camera, jolted by the sound of a louder bird cawing outside (0:00:55-0:01:36). This moment is presented just prior to the first section's title reveal for the audience: This Big does not start his story in a state of "Fear" like his literary counterpart. He begins with his "Fate," which is the original title for Wright's final section.

Several conversations have been started here for those familiar with other works – a moment of simultaneity all about the relationships between Wright's literary creation, Ellison's novel, Baldwin's criticism, and Johnson's film adaptation. Importantly, without these contexts, Johnson does frame his protagonist clearly for a fresh viewing audience.

Big is an alternative intellectual overshadowed by violence in this scene; he views himself as separate from the Chicago setting around him as he looks down from his window and claims in a voiceover to have the "whole world to [him]self" (0:00:40-0:00:45). Yet simultaneous meanings emerge if a viewer is aware. As a smaller example, after looking out his window, he sinks back into his room and onto a bed covered in deep red as a precursor to the violent killing on different bed later in his infamous story. His bed initially hides an instrument of violence, and that gun covers the other part of himself offered to the audience during this scene – his copy of *Invisible Man*. Additionally, if the scene is extended beyond the section title of "Fate" into the film's first five minutes, the audience is shown a different version of Big's morning routine. Big adds eyedrops as he looks at his own reflection; he wears glasses on his way out of the house. He kills the black rat, but it is a single hit before he disposes of the rat in the trash (0:01:38-0:04:40). This adapted Bigger has his eyes open, and he clearly believes that he can see. He controls his violent urges far more than Wright's character from the start, and he goes out of his way to keep his literal vision perfect. In essence, Big is set up with the humanity that Baldwin's criticism found so lacking in the novel; Big is a character with interiority, beyond a social or racial categorization. However, this reality remains harsh, and his cleared eyes still cannot fully see. Adapted Big is just as blind to his eventual fate, as emphasized by the altered order for the section titles. It may be a different kind of blindness within a different political text, but a blindness perpetuates nevertheless into the 21st century, demonstrating why Wright's protest narrative remains politically potent and relevant in the present.

Taking a momentary step back, it is important to recognize that previous *Native Son* adaptations also include variations within this initial scene, and many of those versions also set up an altered kind of protagonist within their story. Two important examples of adapted opening scenes include the 1986 film and the 2014 play. To start, the 1986 film opens slowly on Bigger (Victor Love) awakening in bed, waiting for his alarm clock to sound the start of his day. He shifts beneath his covers and blinks slowly in the dim room until his alarm clock drones. His mother (Oprah Winfrey) then calls for him to "shut that thing off" (0:00:20-0:02:27). As they dress, the infamous black rat runs across the room, his mother's voice screaming for him to "kill it" until Bigger is swinging repeatedly at the animal's body. Bigger then drags the unmoving rat into frame, directly before his own face, as he is told to take the corpse out of the apartment. The rat's coat is slightly ragged, and its body is already rather stiff as Bigger swings it from its tail. He takes the rat outside, and then he drops it several stories up into a heap of garbage (0:03:26-0:05:21).[109] This drop acts as foreshadowing of Bigger's own jump and eventual fall during his snowy run from the police just after the discovery of Mary's earring at the film's climax (1:18:12-1:21:44). Bigger may not be literally beaten like the black rat during this scene, but the threat of lynching and gunfire is palpable from the visually encroaching police officers as well as the voiceovers from unseen news reporters and Chicago citizens; his final fall from a water tower is precipitated by a gushing stream of freezing water, which blinds him to his surroundings. He cannot help but fall and

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[109] As an interesting contrast, the 1951 film has Bigger swing once to kill the rat, and it is framed more as protecting his family than following his mother's orders. He is also introduced via voiceover as a man interested in the life of an explorer, which emphasizes a personalized character motivation much more so than the 1986 version (Chenal).

therefore be captured. But in addition to the framing with the black rat, Bigger's open eyes prior to his alarm are incredibly telling. Bigger stares straight into the camera, his eyes wide without him seeming aware of his surroundings. This Bigger may not need an alarm clock either, and his eyelids may literally be lifted prior to the alarm. However, this Bigger seems haunted more than self-aware, as if the horrors of his social reality are just waiting to sound and his consciousness of that reality has paralyzed him in terror. He will not escape, and this protagonist seems already surrendered to his fate by the very first shot of the film.

Alternatively, the 2014 play focuses primarily on the black rat, with this adaptation actually making him into a speaking character. The Black Rat is subsequently described as "the physical manifestation of Bigger's double consciousness, or how Bigger sees himself through the eyes of others" (Nambi 5). Although the entire play takes place in a mere second of time within Bigger's mind as he runs from the police officers and reflects back on his crimes, the Black Rat stalks him throughout his memories. He becomes a fantastical element, both psychologically and sociologically revealing to the audience, that Bigger has been distanced from his humanity by the brutal 20th century American society (Wren, Soloski). As a voice in the darkness, the Black Rat calls out to the solitary Bigger on stage about this lived reality: "We all got two minds. How we see them seeing us. How we see our own self. But how they see you take over on the inside. And when you look in the mirror – You only see what they tell you you is. A black rat sonofabitch" (Nambi 9). And even though Bigger finds a brief moment of claimed humanity by the ending, his conclusion is not a "celebration" but "the conviction of one who will survive" as a human. Up until Bigger's final acceptance, the Black Rat still attempts to speak over

his moment of personhood about his diminished sight (117). Bigger does seem to overcome the way that he sees himself in this adaptation, but he remains powerless to the reactions from the society around him. He cannot fully celebrate because he has only escaped his own perception – how the Black Rat blinded him from himself. Others remain just as blind.

So with this acknowledgement of simultaneity in both the 1986 film and the 2014 play, how does the 2019 film stand out? In essence, the previous two examples engender greater insight via the lens of simultaneity, especially prior knowledge of Wright's novel alongside the adaptations. If a viewer is aware that the novel has Bigger awakened by an alarm, sleeping with his eyes closed as an avoidance of his reality, then it is possible to find deeper meaning in Bigger's anxious, sleep-deprived stare in the 1986 film's opening moments. Or if an audience member is familiar with W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of double-consciousness and Wright's opening black rat scene, the Black Rat's monologue carries a greater immediate weight in the 2014 play. Adaptations, as argued generally earlier in this chapter, expand as simultaneous conversations are recognized. Johnson's version of *Native Son* goes a step further. The film is not simply enriched by such simultaneous engagement; it expects and exploits a recognition of simultaneity in order to communicate fully with its audience. This *Native Son* embraces the intertextual potential of a knowing audience because it includes these opportunities to be many things at the same time – it is the *Native Son* didactic narrative, the influences of *Invisible Man,* the

criticisms from Baldwin and Ellison, the current political climate all at once.[110] The text is not only enriched but completed because it adapts in multitudes.

And so, within those initial five minutes of the 2019 film, the inclusion of *Invisible Man* can now be analyzed as purposeful, simultaneous engagement. How does this Bigger – a character simultaneously functioning as an adaptation of the protagonist from *Native Son* as well as a knowledgeable reader of *Invisible Man* – see himself during these opening scenes? The *Invisible Man* influences are woven into his perspective on how Big sees himself within this 21st century world: a man potentially invisible to others yet also a man conscious of this reality. He does not claim blindness or closed eyes himself, but he is invisible just like Ellison's narrator: a "high visibility [that] actually render[s] one un-visible" as Ellison describes (*Invisible* xv). He is a "fundamental contradiction" because he exists "and yet [he is] unseen" by the Chicago city asleep around him (507). He is educated, well-read, and awake, but he is still framed by the stereotypes society places onto him for his gender and his race. "I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind," this version of Bigger might as well state in his own monologue as a repetition of Ellison's narrator. Yet, just like that narrator, Big believes himself as invisible "simply because people refuse to see [him]" (3). He recognizes the blindness of others, and he refuses to let himself be blind.

But even more striking, how Big sees himself is only part of this simultaneous conversation. As Ellison states, his narrator has "difficulty in seeing himself" (*Invisible,*

[110] Just as I previously noted for *U.S.!,* it is not that the film must be experienced with that prior knowledge in order to be understood at all. I instead claim again that the work is expanded if these simultaneous conversations are recognized by a viewing audience.

xiii). Big is no different. He is so hyper-aware of how he is seen by others, on how he presents himself to be seen by the world, that he misses the opportunity to see himself. He therefore remains partially blind – hindered by the cultural vision allowed to him. He is a version of Bigger Thomas knowingly caught by the vision of white elites yet a version also consumed by his churning anger – just like Ellison's narrator argues, a man "caught between guilt and innocence, so that now they seemed one and the same" (419). It does not matter that he puts drops in his eyes or glasses on his nose; the gun on top of his chosen book weighs heavy on his ideals, and those glasses, which are meant to make things clearer, are "not strong" by Big's own admission (*Native,* Johnson 0:27:38-0:27:51). The violence remains simmering under the surface of his self-perception, and he remains split just like Wright's protagonist.

This incomplete self-perception is best realized by the short scene Big spends in front of a mirror, an extension of his morning routine. As shown in figure four via three progressing shots, Big initially wipes the excess eyedrops liquid from his cheek; he then leans back to look at himself in the bathroom mirror, and the camera slowly shifts focus from his reflection to the back of his head (0:02:42-0:02:54). Big is closest to a full self image in the first shot as he still messes with his eyedrops. His image is broken in the middle by the line between two different mirrors, but the overlap mostly presents a single

Figure Four: The following three shots demonstrate the changing reflection of Big in his bathroom mirror: first brushing liquid eyedrops with his thumb as his face is split down the center, second shifting back to show two complete reflections in the mirror, and third a blurring of the two reflections as the camera shifts to focus on the back of his head and Big continues to stare at himself (*Native,* Johnson 0:02:42-0:02:54).

– if jaggedly presented – Bigger Thomas. Big here attempts to see himself without any restrictions, even though his social realities cannot show him perfectly whole. But just like the *Invisible Man* narrator, Big struggles to see himself. He has a double consciousness that he does not fully yet understand, despite his belief that he does. As W.E.B. Du Bois first outlined, he essentially "feels his two-ness, - an American, a [Black man]; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (5).[111] His vision therefore splits in the mirrors, and he appears both to himself and to the viewing audience as two distinct men in the reflection by the second included shot. Even though Big looks very similar in both versions at first glance, he is caught as an incomplete self: he is guilty just as he is innocent, and he cannot bring his separated selves into a single person. As Big slightly raises his chin as a subtle motion of defiance toward the mirrors, the images start to blur, with the difference between innocence and guilt becoming harder to distinguish. Are the reflections the same, or are there subtle differences? As these two disconcerting Bigs are blurred, the single Bigger, the physical man gazing into the mirror, comes sharply into focus only from behind. The scene ends on the back of his head – his facial features and therefore his individual humanity obscured from the audience. He is technically still seen by the camera, but his reactions, thoughts, and facial expressions are rendered effectually invisible. And those incomplete reflections remain, hauntingly looking back from the bathroom mirror.

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[111] Johnson specifically lists W.E.B. Du Bois' theory of double consciousness as an important influence on this film as well (B. Davis). The concepts of invisibility from Ellison, double consciousness from Du Bois, and blindness from Wright are recognized here as overlapping in conversation for this film, a simultaneous engagement on race and racism in the United States.

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With these various influences woven throughout the start of the film, significant adaptational changes cascade by the story's culmination – Big's run from the law following Mary's accidental death in the final section "Flight." Character interactions occur at a rapid pace at this point, a compelling reflection on Big's frenzied mental state. Big meets with Jan, who believes that his girlfriend's death must have been an accident and offers to find him a lawyer. After proclaiming that he did not rape Mary nor have sex with her, Big becomes skittish and draws his gun – an important callback to that opening scene – on a startled Jan. He flees to hide at his girlfriend Bessie's house as the manhunt around the city of Chicago ensues (1:24:13-1:26:44). Initially, Big tries to lie about his involvement to Bessie so he can convince her to run away with him, but she eventually demands the truth as they hide together in an abandoned building. While their relationship is far more emotionally developed than Wright's original narrative, Big does not react well to her accusations, and he is particularly frantic after her decision to throw his gun out of a window. He begins to choke her in a slowly building rage before he lets her leave alive, stuttering out apologies as he crouches miserably in a corner (1:34:39-1:37:11). As the police cars approach outside, Big watches out the window as Bessie walks away with tears in his eyes, and she briefly glances back to him before she leaves him to his fate (1:38:00-1:38:31). Big's reactions are frightening to Jan and Bessie both. However, even though he wields his gun at one individual and almost suffocates another, Big does not kill an additional person in this adaptation; this lack is an important distinction as, unlike the circumstances around Mary's death, Wright's Bigger transitions from accidental demise to outright "intentional and calculated" murderer by the end of

the novel, no longer running only from “an automatic response to overwhelming fear” (Cohen 220). While he does initially lash out at other characters, the film’s Big limits his enacted violence. By the film’s end, however, violence is dreadfully enacted upon his body as he commits suicide by letting the surrounding police officers believe he is ready to pull a gun out of his jacket pocket (*Native,* Johnson 1:39:50-1:40:00).

This decision initially reads as a major adaptational change for many viewers, as most *Native Son* stories proceed with the most didactic elements of the court trial and eventual conviction as the ending.[112] But this framing should be expected if simultaneity – a compilation not just via Wright’s novel and its ending but multiple integrated narratives – is discerned. Big appears shaken in these final minutes, and his violent reactions such as lashing out at Bessie and aggressively threatening Jan are disjointed. He cannot find a path to redemption, instead repeating to Jan and Bessie both that he has run out of options when they individually ask him to turn himself in. He appears consumed by his despair and his limitations. As one reviewer describes the ending, “Rather than his murder of Mary begetting more murder, as it does in Wright’s novel, this film’s Bigger imposes the consequences of his actions on himself – by committing suicide by cop. His death means that he rejected the life of a killer; it is his redemption” (McWilliams). However, this interpretation of the ending is too clean – a personal redemption for a character study that sidesteps the didacticism still very much present in this adaptation. Just because the court case has been excluded, the work itself has not abandoned political messaging alongside its literary narrative. To authentically understand this ending, a

[112] The 2019 film is not the only adaptation to cut the courtroom content, however. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, for example, the 2014 play primarily takes place within a moment in Bigger’s mind while Bigger literally is confronted by police officers.

simultaneous reading cannot reject the didactic influences of Wright's *Native Son* as if it does not also remain a vital part of the film's literary conversation. The adaptation can be multiple things at once, can have multiple meanings all at once. As the ending demonstrates, it is a character study as well as political commentary for racist policing in the United States. The didacticism does not have to be erased from the film because influences such as Baldwin and Ellison have also been included. Those influences instead all function together so that the interrelations become even more potent.

In material ways, this ending is constructed by plot points and character motivations from both *Native Son* and *Invisible Man.* For example, Wright's Bigger does not plan to be captured by the police during his own "Flight" from arrest. Although his immediate plan revolves around the shooting of the advancing officers, he also plans to "save one bullet for himself" because he claims that "they would not take him alive" (310). This Bigger has more murderous aims with his initial attack plan, as the film's Big instead pretends to draw a gun from his jacket as the cops demand he surrender, but the impulse toward suicide over capture remains consistent in both works. Additionally, just after his eventual arrest, the novel's Bigger appears depleted of his will to live: "There was no day for him now, and there was no night; there was but a long stretch of time, a long stretch of time that was very short; and then – the end. Toward no one in the world did he feel any fear now, for he knew that fear was useless; and toward no one in the world did he feel any hate now, for he knew that hate would not help him" (315). This emptiness is similarly captured in the final moments of Big's life. He starts out frantic, running around the empty building with the wavering camera just before his face to match his agitation. However, after he looks out at Bessie, he deflates. He walks slowly

to a large, empty space. Silent tears stream down his face as he waits for the coming bullets. In addition, these scenes are punctured by very clear if jarring shots of Big's face, unlike the previously considered bathroom mirror scene. More than any other moment in the text, Big here is "caught between guilt and innocence" just like Ellison's narrator – his death would not truly bring him to visibility even though he had few other options in life due to his racial status and society's inherent blindness (Ellison, *Invisible* 419, 559).

The return of this blindness context persists and illuminates Big's ultimate decision as well. In the final "Flight" section, which starts immediately with his attempt to cover up Mary's death, Big is grappling less with the blindness of others and more with his own blindness. Their blindness is expected and dangerous, a perception that echoes in his refusals to submit to arrest. But now in addition, Big confronts his own self-perception, a serious shift from the opening scenes. As Big tries to initially pretend at normalcy with his family and friends, for example, his voiceovers communicate that he understands the dangers of blindness broadly: "The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision." Having sight – or believing in the constructed society as presented – is surrendering to the illusion portrayed by a racist social system; the "highly-visible" aspect of Ellison's invisibility could be said to fall under this type of sight. But vision is beyond that cultural perception, an ability to see not just what is but what can be. And so as Big continues to recognize the blindness of others, he shifts to note his own blindness and its foibles. "Maybe everybody's blind," Big's voiceover tells the audience, "even me" (1:17:22-1:17:38).

Extending this acknowledgement, Big's expanded vision is the final imagery of the film. As he lies bleeding out on the ground, police officers surround him. Their

conversations are muted to background noise, but their reactions are visible even as the camera slowly moves from a full shot of Bigger's body to a close up on his face; one officer takes his limp hand from his pocket, and its emptiness is prominently displayed to the gathered crowd. Big coughs blood as he fades away, and his voiceover starts with his mostly vacant eyes open enough to see the sun peaking through the dilapidated ceiling: "In it, and of it, and now flying high and above it. Looking down on the whole Earth" (1:40:19-1:40:36). This quotation starts with "in it," placing the audience briefly back at the start of the film. That Bigger was looking out of an open window and claiming the whole world for himself. Then, Bigger was "of it," not separated from society as he previously believed but just as blind as everyone else. Finally, he ends "flying high above it" with the ability to see "the whole Earth" as he dies. His previous view of the world, as a well-read outsider with knowledge but without full understanding, prompted him to believe he was whole then. But now he isn't just looking out of a window. This Big has an altered viewpoint, a new kind of vision, because he can see that his previous invisibility lead to his own perpetuated blindness. The film then ends with the sun lighting Big's vision, eclipsing his sight as the black text of the credits is then presented on a bright, blindingly white screen.

With that context in mind, however, the political message of the film dictates its ending more than potentially any other influence. By the 1950s, despite his continued publications, Wright's standing was not so much eclipsed by the likes of Baldwin and Ellison as it was "erased" from the American literary consciousness (Jackson 289). His brand of overt political writing was no longer fashionable, and he continued with his direct style of writing, even as his politics shifted over time. But Wright's infamous

Native Son never did quite fade away, with adaptations continuously being made decade after decade because his observations about racism and classism remained an important point of reference for American political commentary (McParland 61). Even though criticisms often persist to limit what *Native Son* can mean, the narrative's complex political messaging outlines "several kinds of narratives for the reader to untangle" in connection with identity, race, class, and social expectations (Cohen 209-210). Wright was never explicit with his political intent during the final courtroom section, but those intentions were "undoubtedly political, an attempt to weave his view of racism and his collectivistic ideology into the thematic fabric of the novel" alongside "a larger, proletarian struggle – a recognition that could profoundly change Bigger's consciousness" (223). Johnson's Big horrifically demonstrates his internalized belief, despite the accidental nature of his crime and the reassurances from others, that he has been found guilty. He cannot safely turn himself in. It is too late for that, as he repeats to others, not because his crime has been discovered but because he exists in a racist society. Yet his final voiceover, the very last words of the film, have one final note beyond the connection to previous blindness. Big hopes for a future change, a political call still part of that same Wrightian struggle: "Wish that it was different… But it ain't. Not yet… not yet" (*Native,* Johnson 1:40:37-1:40:49). Just as Wright's fiction suspended "neat" political action or inevitable historical progress for a comforting ending, just as he recognized the "contingent messiness and occasional failures" of political actions, Johnson's Big does the same (Mills 60, 67).

As a 2019 study on police brutality in the United States demonstrates, Black men face a 1 in 1,000 chance of being killed by police – a "leading cause of death for young

men" in the 21st century (Edwards et al. 16793).[113] With persistent calls in American culture to recognize police brutality in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests, *Native Son* remains as a jarring cry for citizens to open their eyes and cease looking away (McParland 59). As Glenda Carpio argues, "Especially in today's dark political climate, we need Wright's penetrating vision to guide us, to help us understand the resurgence of white supremacy, and the broad economic, political, and structural context which has caused it to surge now and will likely cause it to surge again" (14). His "penetrating vision" is exactly the guidance perpetuated by the 2019 *Native Son* adaptation: the blunt, jarring police brutality message in its final moments unquestionably included. Importantly, Wright's work continues to speak through these adaptations, works that are motivated by their contemporaneous political climates as well as connected political conversations. Sadly, the political commentary of the 20th century, updated for a new historical moment, continues to echo with the reverberations of Wright's frightening context, and *Native Son* as didactic American literature will have an imperfect yet vital place as long as it continues simultaneous political engagements as explored with this interpretation. "Not yet," this most recent Bigger Thomas narrates as he chokes on his own blood after his death by police shooting – a statement about the continued need for such outspoken political literature in the United States. *Native Son* was an outspoken protest novel for a reason in its historical moment. In the 21st century, the story's political outrage continues simultaneous conversations about the need to revive and revitalize

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[113] For further context, Black men are at the highest risk of death due to police violence at 1 in 1,000, while men overall have a 1 in 2,000 risk and women overall 1 in 33,000. All groups are at the highest risk between the ages of 20 years and 35 years (Edwards et al. 16793).

political didacticism in American literature with a breathy note that the message has “not yet” been received.

CONCLUSION

THE FUTURE FOR DIDACTIC AMERICAN LITERATURE: SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As I finish this project in the early 2020s, the rise of "politicized" literature seems to be discussed constantly in public forums, although the range of such so-called politicization ranges from the diversity of casting in Hollywood movies to outright acknowledgement of world-ending concerns. Most importantly for this research, representations of direct didacticism are continuing to emerge into mainstream discussion as well. The desire to break through prevailing norms and the hope to represent stories in alternative manners – such sentiments echo the intentions expressed by didactic American works from the early 20th century, as politicized topics such as racism, sexism, and class disparity are explored again with direct messages within literature for change. So where does this increase in didactic political engagement leave current American literature broadly and adaptations specifically, especially as the oppressive narrative of failure continues to haunt leftist messaging? How can American literature demand political change while it also encourages the advancement of diverse voices and human needs? In other words, what remains possible and achievable for the rest of the coming 21st century?

As one final consideration, I want to briefly examine musician David Byrne, most famously known as a member of the American rock group Talking Heads, and his seventh solo album titled *American Utopia.* The album was initially released in 2018; it was then adapted as a Broadway production in 2019, and most recently it was released on

HBOMax as a stage recording directed by Spike Lee. Despite its claimed title, *American Utopia* does not actually imagine a utopian future for American viewers. Rather, it confronts them with a plea about the fractured present in order to improve upon that version of reality. Byrne's performance is full of coordination and unity, from the deceptively simple yet frenetic choreography to its costuming as matching iconic gray suits worn by all barefoot performers.[114] His performance considers the struggles of contemporary American life alongside the desire for improvement via music and monologues, and it does not seek such commentary in a subtle manner.

Byrne asks his audience to understand the importance political topics such as local elections, the immigrant experience, and police brutality throughout the duration of his Broadway production. As one example, Byrne's show includes a blatantly didactic moment when he calls for immediate voter registration as well as recognition of democratic power between songs. Byrne shares that he personally became an American citizen after living in the country for six decades so that he could vote, as he previously lived in the United States as a British citizen with a green card. According to an interview during the show's run, an average six out of ten audience members registered to vote after his Broadway performances right in the theater's front lobby (Grow). In protest against police brutality, as another example, Byrne covers Janelle Monáe's call-and-response protest anthem "Hell You Talmbout" in the second half of the show. Monáe performed the song for the 2017 Women's March on Washington to recognize incidents

[114] Byrne is quite famous for his suit selections, and the gray suits selected for *American Utopia* lean into that identity. In this case, all dancers wear the same suit as Byrne throughout the performance in order to escape any idea of hierarchy within the work. As Byrne states, "I thought plain but elegant suits would unify us and help reveal us as a tribe, a community" (Spencer).

of police brutality against Black men and women such as Sandra Bland and Trayvon Martin (Gensler). Creating an adaptation of his own with the cover, Byrne specifically echoes her political sentiments in his version, and he shares with his audiences in a monologue that he asked for her permission as a white man to perform her song prior to adding it in. He asserts that she believes the song to be "for everyone," for "humanity" – and he agrees with her claim. In the film version of his show, the performance ends with images of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd alongside a list of "too many more" names displayed across the screen in bright red (*David* 1:24:20-1:29:32). The point of the cover, just like the point of the voter registration efforts, is overtly political in nature.

Yet vitally as previously referenced, all of this political discussion does not engage with the future as the word "utopia" implies; actually, the music outright rejects such engagement. One of the new songs, "I Dance Like This," focuses on personal improvement in the present while renouncing pressure from a distant future: "I'm working on my dancing/ this is the best I can do/ […] I can't say I'm ashamed/ can't think of tomorrow/ when it seems so far away" (1:05:33-1:06-13). This content, labelled consciously as a utopia by its creator, is actually political activism confronting current dystopian elements of society, a demanding plea for a world with social justice as even a possibility. Byrne wants his listeners to take political action in the present instead of the "so far away" future, and so he only focuses on that realizable present within his lyrics and his performance. The didacticism is overt and outspoken through the music as well as the production elements.

But Byrne's work specifically stands out in connection with this project's broader considerations because he encourages the process of adaptation, recognizing the gained power for creative works such as music once it has been covered by others with unique perspectives. As displayed by his "Hell You Talmbout" cover, he understands how didactic creative work ultimately grows once it can be a changeable, explicitly adaptive political text itself – one either extended from the original message as his cover demonstrates or adjusted due to the experiences of a new creator. And so to continue the discussion of *American Utopia,* as well as to discuss this adaptive practice, one specific song from the album comes into focus. During his initial tour, Byrne asked the students of the Detroit School of Arts to adapt his song "Everybody's Coming to My House." He added the cover to his official YouTube page, and he includes their recording at the end of his *HBO* special over the credits. As Byrne describes, the students "changed" and "brought out a different meaning in the song" when compared to his own version (CBS). In his original recording, Byrne's voice remains breathy and hesitant because he is unsure about these guests coming into his personal space, particularly because he is "never gonna be alone" again. His distress grows over the course of the song despite initially adding himself to the guests as a "we," and he eventually separates himself while also mourning his personal loss of a "home" compared to the "house" inhabited during the final verses: "I'm never gonna be alone/ and I'm never gonna go back home."

The Detroit choir version, aptly labelled "American Utopia: Detroit," makes some distinct changes. Most obviously, the tone is much more buoyant and the song united, with many students getting brief solos prior to the choir coming together and clapping out an animated beat. The students all adopt a lighthearted inflection, and they sway together

to the music as they sing. In other words, they display a joyful unity in their rendition of the song, an audible change from Byrne's recording. But in a more subtle shift, the choir also decides to keep the lyrics for the chorus stable for the song's entirety. They sing again and again: "Everybody's coming to my house/ Everybody's coming to my house/ I'm never gonna be alone/ and we're never gonna go back home." While Byrne seems to see his home as lost, and the additional crowd as dubious, the choir desires a new reality alongside others. Their reality takes from the past, in this case Byrne's original song, and changes its mournful reflection on the present into an optimistic "house" for all people. They are not going back "home" to the lonely version of the past but the imagined version of a "house" in a revised future. As Byrne himself outlines in his *HBOMax* special for his live audience,

> About a year ago, I invited a high school choir in Detroit, Michigan, to do an interpretation of this next song. The song's called "Everybody's Coming to My House." […] And in my version, and that's the version you're gonna hear, it kinda sounds like the singer is not sure how he feels about everybody coming over to his house. And you can sense, although he never says it in the song, you can sense that he's thinking, 'When are they gonna leave?' In contrast, their version – and this was kinda a profound thing for me – they didn't change a single lyric, they didn't change the melody, and yet their version has a completely different meaning. Their version seems to be about welcome, inviting everyone over, inclusion. I kinda liked their version better, and I didn't know how they did it. Unfortunately, I am what I am. (*David* 36:13-37:25)

Of course, the power remains for both versions, and Byrne then continues to perform the song as he originally created it. His version is not lost due to the adaptation of the choir. The fears of isolation and social pressures are still present, as well as the fear of expected public identity. In this way, the Detroit choir represents not a rejection of the previous song but instead an optimistic call for *revising the ideas of a past* – in this case, the previously created version in *American Utopia* – in order to *find new meaning for new*

audiences and new political messages. They do not simply hold onto the previous version of the text. They do not reject the simultaneous meanings of the song itself, but they allow for an updated meaning for themselves, as young Black men and women in Detroit seeking community and bonds. Their present homes might not be perfected, but their houses, together as a future community, can be realized. In other words, the cover is adapted to their desires, their messages, while also building on Byrne's original didactic messaging. And Byrne celebrates that changeable nature, that continued life in his lyrics and ideas.

This kind of engagement is beautiful in many ways, not only because it demonstrates the powerful possibilities of adaptation as argued in this project. In addition, however, *American Utopia* is a didactic work for the 21st century without question. This return to a didactic approach alongside political outreach shows how the desire to speak with the American public through didactic writing has surged yet again. Of course, the tightrope of didactic writing remains difficult, as the desire to change people's minds is a complicated path for any creator. Yet, the successful works – ones like Sinclair's *The Jungle,* London's *The Iron Heel,* Wright's *Native Son* from the past alongside all of the adaptations to follow over the subsequent century – guide American society toward important conversations about workers' rights, immigration, wage disparity, racism, and even climate change and voting rights. In many cases, audiences still expect didactic literature to either completely solve its political concerns or be relegated to complete failure if unable to do so: the options are save the world and correct all its ills or be deemed ineffectual, a heavy load for any single piece of literature to bear. Maybe instead, the American public can move toward a recognition that more options

than complete change or complete failure are acceptable for political writings, and an important space for didactic literature can be carved out in American culture once again.

As David Byrne states at the end his production about social issues such as racism in the United States, "[…] despite all that's happened, and despite all that's still happening, I think there's still a possibility. We're a work in progress. We're not fixed. Our brains can change" (*David* 1:29:55-1:30:09). I agree. What has happened and what is still happening both matter. Didactic literature such as those discussed in this project must continue speaking to that potential for change as political stories are adapted well into the continuing 21st century. Progress can be found in the work toward those previously unmet possibilities.

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EDUCATION

University of Kentucky, Lexington KY
Doctorate of Philosophy in Literature, 2022
Graduate Certificate in College Teaching and Learning, 2020
Graduate Certificate in Gender and Women's Studies, 2019

Truman State University, Kirksville MO
Master of Arts in English, 2014
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, 2012

ACADEMIC HONORS AND AWARDS

University of Kentucky, Lexington KY
Provost's Outstanding Teaching Award, 2021
Arts & Sciences' Outstanding Teaching Award, 2021
Semester Dissertation Research Fellowship, 2020
Summer Dissertation Research Fellowship, 2019
Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies' Excellence in Teaching Award, 2019

PROFESSIONAL POSITIONS

University of Kentucky, Lexington KY
Instructor of Record, English Department, 2019-2022
Teaching Assistant, English Department, 2021
Instructor of Record, Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies Department, 2016-2021
Research Assistant, English Department, 2020
New Teacher Mentor, Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies Department, 2017-2019
CARES Freshman Summer Program Instructor, Center for Academic Resources and Enrichment Services, 2017

John Wood Community College, Quincy IL
Associate English Instructor, English Department, 2014-2016

Truman State University, Kirksville MO
Instructor of Record, English Department, 2012-2014
Assistant Editor, *The Chariton Review Literary Journal,* 2013-2014

PUBLICATIONS

"Review: Cruising the Library: Perversities in the Organization of Knowledge by Melissa Adler." *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* (Co-Written), 2018

"Control Panels, Numerous Screens, and Wheeled Chairs: An Examination of the TEAL Classrooms in the University of Kentucky's Jacobs Science Building." *2016-2017 Computers & Writing Conference Proceedings,* 2018

"An Analysis of Job Listings on rhetmap.org for Junior Scholars: Academic Years Spanning 2013-2014, 2014-2015, and 2015-2016." *Rhetmap.org* (Co-Written), 2017

"A Master of the Game: Why BBC's Sherlock Claims a Disability to Influence Social Opinion." *Sherlock Holmes: Essays on Identity, McFarland* (Co-Written), 2016

SERVICE WORK

University of Kentucky, Lexington KY
English Digital Project Awards Coordinator, English Department, 2019-2022
President, English Graduate Student Organization, 2018-2019
Graduate Student Conference Representative, 2018-2019
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