REWRITING THE AMERICAN WORK NARRATIVE: MODERNIST LITERATURE AND THE PARADOX OF PATRIOTIC LABOR

By

Jesse Cook

Bachelor of Science – English
Utah Tech University
2013

Master of Arts – English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
2016

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Jesse Cook

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Doctor of Philosophy – English
Department of English

Jessica Teague, Ph.D.
Examination Committee Chair

John Hay, Ph.D.
Examination Committee Member

Gary Totten, Ph.D.
Examination Committee Member

Elizabeth Nelson, Ph.D.
Graduate College Faculty Representative

Alyssa Crittenden, Ph.D.
Vice Provost for Graduate Education &
Dean of the Graduate College

Abstract

My dissertation, "Rewriting the American Work Narrative: Modernist Literature and the Paradox of Patriotic Labor," analyzes depictions of work in novels and plays from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to consider the ways American literature reckons with the existential relationship between work and the self. Inspired by Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism"—"a relation," Berlant explains, that "exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing"—I explore the paradoxical narrative of American capitalism that espouses devotion to work as the definitive means of formalizing individuality, even as it often undermines that aim. In this regard, my research looks past the material conditions of work to focus on American literature's theorization of work in the early twentieth century and engages post-work theories that propose analyzing labor *in* capitalism rather than capitalism from the standpoint of labor. By engaging a range of authors—including William Dean Howells, Edward Bellamy, Eugene O'Neill, Elmer Rice, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and Zora Neale Hurston—my dissertation presents work as a node through which numerous facets of American life intersect and thus extends the relevance of my research to consider work's role in shaping our understanding of race, nationality, and gender.

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Introduction: "The Right to Live": Work and the American Imaginary

In February 1934, at the height of the Great Depression, Edgar Adams, a 46-year-old veteran living in Philadelphia, wrote to the Department of Subsistence Homesteads, a New Deal program, begging for a plot of land to use for farming. Adams was inquiring about a new program that the Roosevelt administration developed to alleviate unemployment in cities: By offering Americans land "on liberal terms" to be used for part-time subsistence farming, they hoped to redistribute the unemployed across the country to stymie the "cyclical depression" plaguing urban workers (Zahra 159). In conjunction with farming, the workers would also find wage labor, with the understanding that the homegrown produce would offset deflated or part-time pay. The government hoped that this project might provide a means of purpose for those "stranded workers" suffering from "speculative living" (qtd. in Zahra 160, 159). More than an opportunity to escape the poverty, starvation, and indignity of depression-era unemployment, Adams saw the subsistence program as a pathway toward healing the cleave he felt between "body and soul." If given the opportunity to "raise some livestock and produce and in the meanwhile get some sort of job . . . to pay back to the Government their investment in me," Adams believed that he may again "feel as if I have the right to live" (qtd. in Zahra 161). Adams was one of more than 300,000 Americans desperate to regain "the right to live," signaling an endemic understanding of existence inseparably tied to labor. The rhetoric of Adams is notably similar to that of the infamous nineteenth-century ideologue and novelist Edward Bellamy, who was heralded as political visionary when he built his Nationalist political party on the philosophy that "labor is the necessary condition, not only of abundance but of existence upon earth" ("How" 220). This philosophy of labor ontology became the lynchpin of his political movement, Nationalism, which he cultivated in his hugely popular novel, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*

(1888). While Bellamy's labor army may read as draconian utopia today, it echoes, if in exaggerated reverberations, the general interpretation of work as a vital piece of American life.

From the so-called "protestant work ethic" to the Federal Works Progress Administration of the 1930s, to Joe Biden's 2020 Build Back Better Plan, work has long been moralized in America as a fundamental and intrinsically good facet of life that has shaped the way Americans view themselves as individuals and citizens. American identity, rather than being defined by familial caste, often depends on one's work and one's propensity to do it. This intimacy between American identity and American industry can be found in numerous literary works across history: John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" (1690); Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1791); Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853); Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854); Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868); Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* (1868). With the exception of Melville, the perennial contrarian, these works focus almost exclusively on the "rewards of toil": painting work as spiritually nourishing, socially benevolent, and morally formative (Hapke 23). But, twentieth century developments in mass industry brought with it a literary reckoning with how identity is implicated by the value of work.

My dissertation, "Rewriting the American Work Narrative: Modernist Literature and the Paradox of Patriotic Labor," analyzes depictions of work in novels and plays from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to consider the ways American literature reckons with the existential relationship between work and the self. Inspired by Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism"—"a relation," Berlant defines in brief, that "exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing"—I explore the paradoxical narrative of American capitalism that espouses submission to work as the definitive means of formalizing individuality, even as it often undermines that aim (1). In this regard, my research looks past the material

conditions of work to focus on American literature's theorization of work in the early twentieth century and engages post-work theories that propose analyzing labor *in* capitalism rather than capitalism from the standpoint of labor.[1] By analyzing a range of authors—including William Dean Howells, Edward Bellamy, Eugene O'Neill, Elmer Rice, Robert Cantwell, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright—my dissertation presents work as a node through which numerous facets of American life intersect and thus extends the relevance of my research to consider work's role in shaping our understanding of race, nationality, and gender.

Why work? This question possesses dual significance for my project, as it both invites us to consider why writers from this era in literature felt compelled to question work in their writing and why we, as Americans, feel so much obligation to our roles as workers. Perhaps because of work's perceived mundanity, it is often ignored when considering the inter-war psychological fracturing that typically defines the thematic core of Modernist fiction. Or, it may be, as Kathi Weeks posits, that "we tend to focus more on the problems with this or that job, or on their absence, than on work as a *requirement*, work as a *system*, work as a *way of life*" (3). The overwhelming omnipresence of threats to our existential wellbeing, promulgated by work's precarity and our perpetual need to hold down a job, make thinking about work in the abstract a near impossible task. Such a conundrum, Lauren Berlant explains, makes for a cruel symbiosis between the worker and their work, "as the very pleasures of being inside a [work] relation have

[1] Post-work thinking is best understood by a distinction Moishe Postone makes in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (1993) between traditional Marxist criticism and post-work criticism. Postone contends that they represent "two fundamentally different modes of critical analysis: a critique of capitalism *from the standpoint of* labor, on the one hand, and a critique *of* labor in capitalism, on the other." "The first, which is based upon a transhistorical understanding of labor, presupposes that a structural tension exists between the aspects of social life that characterizes capitalism (for example, the market and private property) and the social sphere constituted by labor. Labor, therefore, forms the basis of the critique of capitalism, the *standpoint* from which that critique is undertaken. According to the second mode of analysis, labor in capitalism is historically specific and constitutes the essential structures of that society. Thus," in post-work thinking, "labor is the *object* of the critique of capitalist society" (5-6).

become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming" (2). Such a relation "so threatens what it has meant to 'have a life' that adjustments seem like an accomplishment," making the ongoing crisis of work feel like a natural ebb of life (3).

I also choose to privilege the term *work*, as opposed to *labor*, as a means of broadening my discussion of the activities associated with work. While the terms are often used interchangeably by writers of different eras, there may be conceptual assumptions implied by which term is used. For example, a laborer is inherently assumed to be wage worker, someone who has sold their labor power to an employer for remuneration. Additionally, a laborer is typically envisioned as a worker who physically exerts themselves completing strenuous work tasks.[2] Arguably, this template of the worker as laborer is associated with the industrial heyday of the American post-WWII period, a mythological moment of industrial boon and worker autonomy. During the early years of the twentieth century, the term *labor* was also closely associated with the labor movement, and its attendant political organizations. However, the term *work* allows us to consider a broader scope of labor that is often treated as separate from wage work. I appreciate Samuel Clark's definition of work as "the familiar things we do in fields, factories, offices, schools, shops, building sites, call centres, homes, and so on, to make a life and a living" (Clark 62). Clark's definition is meaningful for its expansive consideration of work in its various iterations. Such a conception of work allows us to consider workers and forms of work that are not traditionally understood as labor: the intern serving an internship, the stay-at-home parent raising a child, or the academic researching in the archives. These activities, while not directly measurable as an output of goods or services to a consumer for payment nevertheless

[2] For instance, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines laborer as "a person who does unskilled physical work for wages."

require exertion and thus deserve inclusion in our discussion of work in America. These types of work blur the line between work and labor insofar as they ask us to consider work as something more than the strictly laborious. While the academic in the archive may not be strenuously exerting themselves like the steelworker in the mill, the *act of working* is still present, the exertion is real if harder to measure. Additionally, the distinction is relevant for its revelation that work is not an innately compensatory act. The parent may not be directly paid for their care work, and they may, in fact, find pleasure in certain parts of the job, but the act of raising a child is still work, as it requires mental, physical, and emotional exertion and represents a component of their life-making.

As such, while we often aim to crystallize terminology, I believe that the porousness of *work* offers an opportunity to reckon with its prevalence in life, a means of quantifying the numerous moments in which we are asked to work. As Weeks observes, this slippage signals the continuation of the "time of production . . . well beyond the discrete workplace, and the relations of production extend beyond the specific employment relation. . . . As a consequence, although the present terms of the work society still require work, the difference between production and reproduction and between work and nonwork becomes increasingly obscure, as the same task could be either a waged or an unwaged activity" (142). Looking at work through this lens, one can address the compound reality of work in our daily lives as it extends beyond the workspace into the home. Thus, the broader language of *work* allows me to consider texts that are not strictly speaking *labor* texts in their traditional understanding. Although some of the texts I explore were written by authors who had explicit ties to the labor movement, many did not. Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* engages with a white-collar worker who suffers from the same numbing routinization that plagued industrial workers in the early twentieth century and

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* considers the burden of the wife's unpaid work. These two workers may not be called laborers, and yet they do labor under the burdensome expectations imposed on them by a society that prizes work as an integral piece of one's selfhood.

Interpreting work in this way enfolds it into the broader Modernist anxiety of the twentieth century. Like concepts of race, gender, class, tradition, and nationalism, which are common subjects of Modernist examination, work as a facet of American life contributed to what R.B. Kershner defines as "the modern break," a moment in which the human epoch radically tipped (31). Technological developments in industrialization—such as efficiency management (Taylorism) and the assembly line (most commonly associated with Fordist industry)—led to greater numbers of mass workers than ever before and fundamentally changed the way workers understood themselves and their purpose in society. Frederick Taylor's fixation on the perfectibility of human action, codified in his *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911), Kershner, notes, brought about a new age of industrial efficiency that birthed "a new managerial class eager to implement principles of rational efficiency" in every aspect of American life (35). Through Taylor's exhaustive study of movement, the human body suddenly became a conspicuous corporeality, its actions measured and standardized.

The mechanized human body was also the fixation of artists and writers. Two years after Taylor published his *Principles*, the 1913 Armory Show in New York introduced Americans to modern art in the form of Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912), a painting that captured the physiological articulation of the human body in a cubist swirl of body movements rushed together like a motion picture blur. At the same time, the grandeur of technological power at the turn of the century reached levels never before conceived. The force

of the technological change left writer Henry Adams, upon witnessing the magnificent power of the dynamo at the Great Exposition in Paris in 1900, with “his historical neck broken by the sudden irruption of forces totally new” (382). The dynamo would, in Eugene O’Neill’s 1929 play of the same name, become the totem through which his protagonist Reuben Light manifests the machine god of futurity. Reuben, dissatisfied with the old-world religiosity of his father, embraces the new god electricity that calls to him through the beautiful song of the dynamo whirl. Even white-collar and creative workers found themselves victims of the general transformation of American craftsmanship into mass industry. The resulting insecurity amongst the largely white male workforce was exacerbated by increased numbers of women workers and workers of color arriving in urban centers through the Great Migration, bringing to the fore the value of work as a tool of cultural and national power. For marginalized groups, this awarded an increased sense of autonomy—and new challenges to overcome—while the hegemony of white male workers felt itself under attack. In this way, ironically, as work transformed into an indistinguishable series of rote actions, it became a more conspicuous part of American life.

Nevertheless, while Modernist studies of labor movements are numerous, little attention has been given to how literature of this period theorizes Work itself, especially in relation to other cultural shifts occurring simultaneously. Therefore, I intend to extend the discourse on labor literature of the twentieth century by considering texts that specifically problematize the existential relationship between work and selfhood.[3] To do this, I look to Lauren Berlant’s concept of cruel optimism to articulate the paradoxical narrative of American capitalism that

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[3] Some examples of scholarship on labor literature include: Joshua Bennett’s *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man* (2020), Simon Cooper’s *Modernism and the Practice of Proletarian Literature*, Nathaniel Mills’ *Ragged Revolutionaries: The Lumpenproletariat and African American Marxism in Depression-Era Literature* (2017), Julia Walker’s *Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre: Bodies, Voices, Words* (2005).

promulgate the sublimation of one's selfhood to one's work as a democratic means of asserting autonomy. Berlant's conception of cruel optimism succinctly articulates the magnitude of the crisis that work represents, especially in the time period under study. The modern break of the twentieth century can be understood in Berlant's terms as an impasse:

> a time of dithering from which someone or some situation cannot move forward . . . a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things . . . and coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event (4).

This confluence of the known and unknown, the old and new, defines the modernist panic, a reckoning with the past in the propulsive present. Work being, as Weeks defines it, that ongoing and frighteningly precarious state of holding onto, losing, and trying to find a job marks it as one such crisis. What is particularly frightening about the cruel optimism of work is that it represents the quintessential "good-life" fantasy in America, thus making it a particularly challenging fantasy to overpower. If, as Berlant contends, the good-life fantasy functions as a vessel through which "people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world 'add up to something,'" efforts to overturn this vessel become personal attacks (2). The suffering becomes the reason for living:

> The conditions of ordinary life . . . are conditions of the attrition or the wearing out of the subject, and the irony that the labor of reproducing life in the contemporary world is also the activity of being worn out by it has specific implications for thinking about the ordinariness of suffering, the violence of normativity, and the 'technologies of patience'

> that enables a concept of the *later* to suspend questions about the cruelty of the *now*. Cruel optimism is in this sense a concept pointing toward a mode of lived immanence, one that grows from a perception about the reasons people are not Bartleby, do not prefer to interfere with varieties of immiseration, but choose to ride the wave of the system of attachment that they are used to, to syncopate with it, or to be held in a relation of reciprocity, reconciliation, or resignation that does not mean defeat by it. (28)

Although I employ Berlant's concept as a generative way of discussing the relationship between work and national identity throughout my project, it more specifically serves as an important means of explaining the reactionary anxiety of the white male worker hegemony in response to cultural changes around work that appear to disrupt the social hierarchy status quo. In doing this, I open the discussion of literature to investigate the ways that anxieties around work contribute to and are affected by national changes in gender and racial equality. As the threat of gender and racial "dilution" becomes more visible both on the job and in the community through the expanded presence of marginalized workers and the reduced professionalism of labor, the reactionary rhetoric of nationhood pushes more aggressively for a return to "traditional values."

These traditional values ultimately crystalize into what political philosopher Mark Fisher defines as capitalist realism: "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (2). Such a worldview stifles imagination and admonishes the subjective experience for stepping out from the objective measurements of the already defined. We hear this often in contemporary discussions of post-work alternatives to our present crisis. "The 'realism' here," Fisher tells us, "is analogous to the deflationary perspective of a depressive who believes that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion" (5). To suggest alternatives to

our present state of affairs is to court death. To question the imposition of work in its current form on our lives and our sanities is to jeopardize national stability or moral purity. I contend that, in various ways, the authors under analysis in this dissertation dare to pose these questions and present imaginative alternatives to the present that were otherwise condemned as unacceptable. By positioning my critical lens in this way, I do not restrict my research to any specific labor or literary movement, and instead include works that most effectively address the cultural moment in which they are produced. As such, I consider all these works to be in some way post-work literature, or part of a post-work literary canon, according to Helen Hester and Nick Srnicek's definition of the term:

> A post-work society should not be mistaken for a utopian endpoint, then, but instead understood as part of an unending Promethean process of extending the realm of freedom. The point of a post-work world—and the reason for its necessary connection to a postcapitalist world—would be precisely that such decisions can be made meaningfully. The goal of minimising necessary labour in order to expand the realm of freedom is a condition for being able to ask these questions in a substantial way. Ultimately, what matters is not the endless reduction of necessary labour per se, but instead the liberation of time and the creation of institutions through which we might consciously and collectively guide the development of humanity. (187-88)

Because the literary works under consideration, in some way, question the centrality of work to one's sense of self, I see them as pressing for answers to questions that go beyond the common concerns of proletarian literature. These texts, while critical of capitalism as a system of oppression, also invite readers to question the very nature of work in American life, and they propose, in varying degrees, alternative understandings of work and life in America. This allows

me to explore under-researched movements, genres, and authors that address work as a function of identity, such as the expressionist playwrights of the 1920s and the forgotten leftist novelist Robert Cantwell. Expanding the discussion of representations of work in literature beyond the scope of well-established movements and genres—such as the proletarian literary movement and associated authors like Mike Gold, Mary Heaton Vorse, and most famously John Steinbeck—my project engages with literature that questions work as a subject of existential concern in its own right, rather than as a function of capitalism. Additionally, tracing the way work was theorized by authors across the first four decades of the twentieth century, my project follows the changing face of labor to consider the shifting views authors held toward work as a core concept of American life.

The first chapter of my dissertation provides a comparative analysis of Edward Bellamy's philosophical argument for a utopian national army of laborers made in *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888) with William Dean Howells' romantic utopian novel series, *The Altrurian Romances*, which is divided into three parts: *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894), *Letters of an Altrurian Traveller* (1893-94) and *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907). I examine the way these nineteenth-century utopian novels reinforce and attempt to resist the prevailing sense of labor as the moral center of American identity in their attempts to reform economic inequality. Both Bellamy and Howells set their utopian project in elsewheres—for Bellamy, the distant future of Boston in the year 2000, and for Howells, the distant land of Altruria, a Pacific paradise isolated from the rest of the world. The chapter represents a necessary grounding for my broader claims about the American work narrative throughout the rest of the dissertation, as it identifies a singular obsession with work as an inviolable component of life.

While Bellamy's "national army of workers" espouses revolutionary claims to upend capitalism and work through a nationalization of industry, his authoritarian enforcement of full employment ultimately modernizes the long history of the American "protestant" work ethic and unwittingly presages the spread of mass industry that will define twentieth century work. As an inverse to Bellamy's urban megalopolis, Howells proposes a pastoral retreat from work orthodoxy, one where work has been reduced to its absolute minimum and culturally reconfigured into a means of community building and health care. By envisioning Altruria as a consciously inefficient society, Howells departs from the drudgery of Bellamy's worker army to invite readers to consider the potential in existential purpose unburdened by the social pressures to work oneself into meaning. Rather, through an embrace of the arts and self-expression, Howells reaches for a post-work imaginary that proves rather provocative for an author who is often understood as a stodgy realist. Through a comparative analysis of these utopian novels, my first chapter in many ways establishes the theoretical grounding of my dissertation. Additionally, I see this pre-modernist period of time, and the late-nineteenth century utopian fiction that it came from, to be representative of a decisive shift in our cultural understanding of work as an ontological signifier of value. Through the coterminous rise of consumerism, work becomes a perennial necessity as mass industry refashions consumption into a cultural standard of expression. Herein lies the tension between Bellamy and Howells' visions of the future, one in which consumption becomes the definitive mode of self-expression in a world of labor absolutism and another in which consumption is superseded by personal growth and communal harmony.

In chapter two, expressionist theatre of the 1920s proves a productive site to continue my discussion of the American work narrative for its emphasis on the psychological interplay

between the inner and outer worlds of the characters, which are evocatively depicted through stylized performance and stage design. Inspired by the *avant garde* stylistics of German expressionism and heir to the social consciousness of the social problem play, American dramatic expressionism combines highly stylized sets and performances with innovative special effects to stage the tension between an oppressive and unfeeling mechanical world and an individual either fighting against or succumbing to the monotonous drudgery of modern American life. Looking at Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922) and Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923), this chapter explores the effects of mass industry on the psyche of twentieth century workers, with a particular focus on the tensions between work's supposed manifestation of masculine power and modern industry's propensity to emasculate male workers. While the plays under consideration, on their surface, address issues of systemic inequality through symbolic worker heroes, their real value comes from the ways they stage the unique desires of their characters in conflict with their homogenizing labor. In this way, O'Neill and Rice complicate earlier representations of workers by dramatizing the hypocrisy of the American work narrative: The characters' nostalgic faith in their work as a liberatory and individualizing piece of their identity precludes them from realizing any true sense of self-actualization in a modern industrial world and often make them complicit in perpetuating exploitative labor systems. Importantly, the two plays selected provide depictions of both the blue- and white-collar workspaces of the twentieth century, affording an opportunity to examine the unique and overlapping conditions of modern work that fomented gendered anxieties about masculinity. I contend that these harmful paradoxes between worker expectations and their realities lead to larger psychological disruptions that bleed into turbulent conceptions of Americanness, masculinity, and race in inter-war America. By looking at these plays alongside the shifting

conception of the American worker in the machine age, the chapter explores the way work impacts culture at large.

Chapter three covers the 1930s through an analysis of the lesser-known proletarian author, Robert Cantwell. In this chapter, I explore the concept of propaganda as it applies to the rhetorical battle fought between pro-capital and pro-labor forces during the 1930s. My analysis in this chapter is guided by Cantwell's paradoxical assertion that his novels are "quite simply, [works] of *propaganda*" because they "work out, in our imaginations, some of the problems the working-class must face in *actuality*." Cantwell's statement calls attention to the unstable boundary between objectivity and subjectivity as it applies to labor discourse and inverts the definition of propaganda to undermine pro-capital narratives, especially in the press, that villainize striking workers. My discussion of Cantwell's explicit use of the term *propaganda* also opens up space to discuss the self-destructive tendencies of leftist writers and critics of the 1930s to over police proletarian literature through arbitrary generic guidelines that ultimately served to undermine the entire proletarian literary movement. Cantwell's stylistically heightened depiction of a power outage at a mill and the subsequent sitdown strike defies many of the tenets of leftist literary realism through a Jamesian interiority that illuminates the existential struggle workers face when confronted with depictions of themselves that do not fit with their own self-understanding. Cantwell's particular interest in the narrativity of labor energizes my discussion of 1930s fiction and literary criticism by complicating the discussion around leftist writers' investment in rhetorical experimentation to counter pro-capitalist rhetoric. For Cantwell and many other leftist writers of the period, the battle over labor rights and autonomy is firmly rooted in a battle for narrative autonomy. Through textual and metatextual analysis, this chapter

interrogates the capitalist weaponization of narrative to villainize striking workers' and the literary left's attempts at defining a liberatory counter narrative.

As a culmination to the previous three chapters of my dissertation, my final chapter focuses on depictions of Black workers by Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Zora Neale Hurston and their emphasis on the assimilationist implications of a nationalistic white supremacist work ideology. Considering the long history of Black Americans' fight against various iterations of enslavement, and thus their complicated relationship to work as both a representation of servitude and freedom, this chapter serves an important close to my discussion of the cruel optimism at play in the American work narrative. Focusing on Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1942/2021), Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), this chapter investigates escape from the American work narrative through the contentious act of refusal of work. Refusal of work, from the autonomous Marxist tradition, rejects the suppositions of work as a mode of social acceptance and wellbeing, instead arguing that even the idealize form of work lacks any inherent value beyond its salability in the labor market. In all three works, refusal of work is attached to a geographical place, most famously Ellison's underground. My chapter expands the discussions often had concerning Ellison's underground to include Wright's posthumous novel, which also engages with an underground exodus from white society, and Hurston's depiction of the Muck, a geographically isolated rural part of Florida where her protagonist, Janie, finds a communal work culture that functions outside the capitalist mentality of her previous husbands. While other works included in my dissertation recognize joblessness as a liminal state of revolt (such as the strike), Wright, Ellison, and Hurston explore it as a sustainable alternative. As a philosophical bookend to my first chapter's study of nationalized work culture as a means of achieving labor utopia, this

chapter considers the meaning of an outright rejection of the American work narrative to address the toxic realities of nationalist desires to assimilate Black Americans to the white worker identity idealized in Bellamy's utopian fantasy.

While these four chapters are by no means a comprehensive study of the broad range of authors writing about work during this time, I see them as a valuable litmus test for the prevalence of work in American literary thought across the first half of the twentieth century. More than a trend of the politically volatile 1930s, work represents an omnipresent topic of interest and anxiety outside the realm of the purely economic. Additionally, the structure of the dissertation is not simply a chronological move through the decades; rather, it captures the evolving views of work across the century from the center to the margins of society. Starting with William Dean Howells and ending with Ralph Ellison is no coincidence or mere march through time. Rather, their polarity as bookends of the dissertation points to the ways work uniquely manifests in the cultural consciousness of various social groups from an idealized act of self-expression to a methodology of control. Furthermore, my decision to extend the discussion of Modernist literature beyond the typical boundaries of the inter-war years helps to show the fluidity and interconnectivity of intellectual thought, which is often neatly defined as and partitioned into great blocs of literary history. However, Howells' and Bellamy's nineteenth century interest in, and fear of, the social effects of technological advancement are intimately connected to O'Neill's and Rice's psychological explorations of the twentieth century worker. Similarly, Hurston's investigation of workaholism harmonizes with Wright's and Ellison's distrust of the social imperative that Black Americans should "work" themselves into social acceptance. Indeed, work remains essentially unchanged across the decades in terms of its social value, but opinions of what that social value costs the individual progress. Thus, understanding

work not just as an embodiment of income or class position, but rather as a distinct psychological condition of life, "Rewriting the American Work Narrative" invites an analysis of literature that considers the ways authors theorized work as a mode of identity formation and in the process reckons with the dangers attendant to such power.

Chapter One: "A Logic Irresistible and Inexorable": Capitalist Ethics in Nineteenth-Century Socialist Utopias

"Labor is the necessary condition, not only of abundance but of existence upon earth"

Edward Bellamy, "How" 220

The premise of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: From 2000 to 1887* (1888) is certainly imaginative: After sleeping for 113 years, the result of a powerful mesmerism gone wrong and an underground sleeping chamber fortuitously designed to hermetically preserve its insomniac inhabitant, Julian West, an aristocrat and the novel's narrator, awakes to find himself in utopian Boston in the year 2000. Following a brief convalescence, a kind of resurrection of the spirit after so long a slumber, and an introduction to his benevolent exhumers, Dr. and Mrs. Leete and their marriageable daughter, Edith, Julian is educated on the radical evolution the United States underwent while he was sleeping. Like any generationally wealthy aristocrat, whose "indifference . . . toward the misery of my [working-class] brothers" equals his preoccupation "with the pursuit of the pleasures and refinements of life," the first question that Julian poses to Dr. Leete regarding the world of the future concerns the developments in labor relations since he was mesmerized at the fin de siècle: "What solution, if any," Julian inquires, "have you found for the labor question? It was the Sphinx's riddle of the nineteenth century, and when I dropped out the Sphinx was threatening to devour society" (6, 3, 22). Leete replies that "as no such thing as the labor question is known nowadays . . . and there is no way in which it could arise, I suppose we may claim to have solved it," adding that "Society would indeed have fully deserved being devoured if it had failed to answer a riddle so entirely simple" (22). The simple solution that Leete conveys to Julian is the formation of a cooperative nation-state, its citizens conscripted into what Bellamy entitles an "industrial army" of compulsory workers,

which has eradicated unemployment, inequality, private property, and all their subsequent pathologies. As Leete goes on to explain to Julian over the course of the novel, every citizen of the country, after completing a kind of technical school, is drafted into the national army of workers, where they remain an employee until the age of forty-five, at which point they become a civilian, in military parlance, and take on civil obligations like voting and occupying civic office. Like a traditional army, the industrial army is organized into a hierarchy of workers and managers stratified up to the president and his cabinet generals, each representing a different branch of industry. Women are expected to work either inside or outside the home, at their discretion, but are segregated into their own political hierarchy under the president. All citizens, both men and women, are given a fixed and equal income that is distributed through credit cards, which are used to purchase goods and services from the national warehouses located throughout the city.

Julian, understandably, is shocked by and skeptical of Leete's revelation but by novel's end has fully converted to the utopia logic of future Boston. This, in many ways, is how Bellamy's novel was received upon publication. Modest sales of the first edition were followed by a tidal of wave of interest that pushed sales into the millions, making it the second novel published in the United States to sell a million copies. Its popularity also spawned over fifty imitators, both sympathetic and antagonistic toward Bellamy's national army, including, of all authors, the devout American realist, William Dean Howells.

Six years after the publication of *Looking Backward*, Howells, inspired by "the dreams of Edward Bellamy," set out to find his own solution to "the riddle of the painful earth" in his utopian novel, *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894) (Bibliographical 4). Containing a similar communalist core as Bellamy's novel, *A Traveler from Altruria*, and the two subsequent works

of his Altrurian Romance—*Letters of an Altrurian Traveller* (1893-94) and *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907)—presents a society of workers, in this case living on a hidden continent named Altruria located in the Aegean Sea, that has eliminated the formal structures of capitalism and rolled back industrial mechanization to preserve the purity of agrarian farming and craft workmanship. As an inversion of Bellamy's narrative structure, *Traveler* brings an Altrurian ambassador, named Aristides Homos, to observe nineteenth-century America and comment on the social ills plaguing the country. Homos only provides a glimpse of Altrurian society in the ending of *Traveler*. It would not be until the third book in the series, *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907), that Howells would fully realize the intricacies of Altrurian daily life. Like William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890), Altruria possesses no currency, and all workers share in the labor of the nation, which is largely agrarian. Unlike *Looking Backward*, which celebrates the industrial ethos of mass production as the key to solving the labor question, Howells draws from American pastoralism to envision a future devoid of material fetishism and industrial productivism.

The distinction between Bellamy and Howells' visions of what constitutes a utopian future for America is vital to my discussion of work in this chapter and the dissertation as a whole, as it identifies a singular obsession with work as an inviolable component of life. While Bellamy's novels initially appear to fulfill the promise of counter-cultural thinking toward work in America, the functional details of future Boston suggest that in many ways Bellamy is actually reinforcing the ideological status quo of American industrialism through a radical amplification of capitalist laborism. What Bellamy defines as the labor question, I would contest is in reality the economic question, an issue that largely revolves around economic inequality—and its subsequent class hierarchy—under capitalism in the nineteenth century. This is spelled out late in

Looking Backward when Julian, during a nightmare of the nineteenth century, looks upon the banking system and proclaims that money, not work, is the "root of all evil" (187). As a result, Bellamy imagines a future that inadvertently abides by the cultural principles of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, advocating for productivism—and, by extension, consumerism—as both a personal and political mode of self-fulfillment. According to Bellamy, "labor is the necessary condition, not only of abundance but of existence upon earth" ("How" 220). To this end, Bellamy succeeds in resolving the problem of economic exploitation by promising all his citizens an equal share of the commodity, which is championed in the novel as a means of obtaining bourgeois status via material accumulation, but he neglects to consider the existential issues that his conservative system perpetuates by demanding full employment of his citizens. While workers may take pride in the fact that they are no longer impoverished cogs in the capitalist machine, they may just as likely lament the fact that they are equal cogs in the national machine.

Scholars have long recognized this flaw in Bellamy's utopia. Reimer Jehmlich, in his critique of what he calls Bellamy's "cog-work socialism," identifies the troubling similarity between Bellamy's utopian labor army and nineteenth-century industrial production (33). "The industrial army," Jehmlich writes, "perpetuates competition and inequality [under capitalism] and—what is more problematic—it exempts the individual from even the slightest possibility of codetermination" (32). Arthur Lipow takes Jehmlich's critique a step further by identifying Bellamy's nationalist movement as an authoritarian socialism that is less interested in formulating "a new community within which individualism could be anchored in a new, noncapitalist setting" than it is in solving "the problem of the individual in modern society by the suppression of individuality and personality in the warm embrace of a bureaucratic society"

(162). All that is left to the worker, as far as civic engagement is concerned, is the exercising of consumer power through the purchasing of goods and services. Matthew Beaumont elaborates on Bellamy's representation of consumerism in millennial Boston, which possesses a systematic, if idealized, fidelity to shopping in a nineteenth-century department store. As Beaumont explains, the "supremely rational" architectonics of the department store informs Bellamy's conception of the utopian "distributing establishment," which reconceptualizes shopping from a frivolous pastime into a "supposedly rational mechanism" for distributing necessary goods to shoppers (*Spectre* 68, 65). This serves Bellamy's larger investment in shopping as a substitution for personality in the novel by perpetuating "capitalism's redemptive promise to the individual consumer" that buying is being (57). Even Nathaniel Cadle, in his defense of *Equality*, Bellamy's sequel to *Looking Backward*, concedes that Bellamy's decision "to eschew literariness" in service to his "vision of an orderly directed economy . . . may have sacrificed more of his 'evocative power' . . . than he realized" (658).

Bellamy is insistent on the rationality of his proposed system and attributes much of the political power of *Looking Backward* to its practicality. Bellamy states this explicitly in an 1890 piece he wrote for *The Nationalist*, in which he articulates the revelation he had concerning the cultural significance of *Looking Backward* after realizing that the "mere fairy tale of social perfection" that he was writing could become "a definite scheme of industrial reorganization" ("Why I Wrote" 202). Later, in an 1893 piece for his self-published and edited newspaper *The New Nation*, Bellamy critiques the early adherents to Nationalist ideology—including William Dean Howells—for busying themselves with "foggy philanthropy" that resulted in "nothing practical." It was the "thoughtful nationalists," such as Bellamy, one can infer, who "began to appreciate the desirability of giving a more practical definite and concrete form" to Nationalist

ideology ("Reason" 466). Such assertions speak to a desire to retain a level of credibility within the bounds of cultural logic by situating what is intended to be fantastical socialism firmly within capitalist ethos. Even Howells, who confesses to the liberatory potential of romantic fiction in an interview for *Traveler* in *Harper's Bazaar*, sells his utopian system as a "practical altruism" (Wilcox 475; *Traveler* 160).[4] As a result, what Bellamy posits, along with many other utopian writers of the late nineteenth century to varying effect, is, by design, a world in which the capitalist conceptualization of labor remains at the center of all social and intellectual pursuits. While capitalistic desires for financial accumulation have been eliminated through social conditioning, work, by its very omnipresence as the fulcrum of social order, becomes not just culturally synonymous with, but socially codified as existence, encompassing the entirety of an individual's social and political conception of the self.

By conceding its power to fantasize "social perfection," Bellamy's utopia fails to harness the fundamental power of the utopian genre: Its imaginative nowhereness. Although this distinguished Bellamy's novel from other utopias, which cast their idealisms in a "perfect city set in the sky" or in a "Nowhere built in some ideal land," and had much to do with the novel's popularity upon its release—Elizabeth Sadler notes that "by clothing the ideal in the garb of the real, [Bellamy] had inspired people with a hope of its speedy attainment"—it also leaves his vision bound to the limitations of rational thinking (Sadler 533). It is the imaginative otherworldliness that permits utopia to satirize the present order and fantasize about a world beyond. As Jehmlich explains, "it is in fact the utopian writer's task to imaginatively

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[4] Marrion Wilcox, in her review of *Traveler from Altruria*, relays to her reader Howells' thoughts on the romantic novel as it pertains to *Traveler*, explaining that "he said that he had frankly called it a romance because it dealt with types and not with characters, and dealt with them freely." Pressed by Wilcox to defend his assertion in light of the fact that Howells was a stringent proponent of realism over romanticism, Howells explains that "while he did not believe in the romantic novel, he did believe in the romance" (475).

complement and make tangible what critics . . . have only outlined, to colorfully transform sketches of the future into detailed maps of Futuria" (29). Bellamy's reticence to embrace the "fairy tale" of futuria ultimately validates the ideology it intends to critique by presupposing that there is no feasible ideology beyond the one currently in place. Thus, although Bellamy resolves the *economic* stratification caused by capitalism through the nationalization of industry, the equal distribution of wealth, and the elimination of private property, he fails to mediate the moral authority of work as it is prescribed under capitalism by valorizing laborism as a national edict. As a result, Bellamy envisions much of utopian society in consumerist terms, rendering his socialist ethos concomitant with market values. Such constructions of work and nationhood, although well-intentioned, nevertheless reinscribe and compound the alienating power of work by insisting upon it as both a moral and patriotic duty that supersedes individual subjecthood. In this sense, Bellamy's utopia unwittingly legislates the American work narrative into a political ideology that overrides all other conceptions of self.

In contrast, Howells recognizes the vampiric power of capitalism to subsume the individual on its quest to amass greater wealth and dominance. As Homos explains in *Traveler*, "by a logic irresistible and inexorable" capitalism "*was*, and we were *not*" (268). Thus, his pastoral turn toward a less industrialized civilization promises a more imaginative articulation of the potentialities of an altruistic and egalitarian labor democracy in which citizens are not defined by their work. Inspired by the pastoral promise of America as the "Garden of the World," in which workers occupied themselves with "blissful labor in the earth," Howells casts Altruria as a consciously inefficient, if industrious, society (S. Smith 123). Admittedly, Howells does press for a communalism that asks the individual to commit his or herself to the body politic through collectivist labor; however, he reconstitutes work and a citizen's relationship to it

as a compartmentalized, finite, and marginal component of life. Reduced to four hours of labor a day, work is redefined as The Obligations, a conceptual shift that explicitly codifies work as a necessary duty that in no way represent those who perform it. As a result, Howells' system promises greater self-satisfaction through an expanded correlation between civic participation and personal hobbies and the individual, something that Bellamy's utopia can only promise as a paradise deferred. In this sense, Howells' conception of full-employment or universal labor actually functions to deemphasize work's importance in a citizen's life.

Nevertheless, the conspicuous nature of Bellamy and Howells' engagement with work as a concept—both in their commentary on nineteenth century capitalism and their imagining of an idyllic post-capitalist future—becomes a powerful medium through which to interrogate the intimate and dangerous bonds formed between identity and work in a capitalist society, which are often obscured by the penumbra of work's necessity. As Kathi Weeks observes in her evocative book, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (2011), work's perceived place within the "natural order" often leads workers to "focus more on the problems with this or that job, or on their absence, than on work as a requirement, work as a system, work as a way of life" (3). As a result, we tend to perceive work, as Bellamy does, as a "necessary and inevitable" facet of life, "something that might be tinkered with but never escaped" (Weeks 7). This, Moishe Postone explains, is largely a problem of perspective. Postone identifies "two fundamentally different modes of critical analysis: a critique of capitalism *from the standpoint of* labor, on the one hand, and a critique *of* labor in capitalism, on the other":

> The first, which is based upon a transhistorical understanding of labor, presupposes that a structural tension exists between the aspects of social life that characterizes capitalism

> (for example, the market and private property) and the social sphere constituted by labor. Labor, therefore, forms the basis of the critique of capitalism, the *standpoint* from which that critique is undertaken. According to the second mode of analysis, labor in capitalism is historically specific and constitutes the essential structures of that society. Thus labor is the *object* of the critique of capitalist society. (5-6)

One can see the limitations of the first method of analysis in Bellamy, who believes that by simply dismantling the structures around work (the market and private property) that he has solved the problems of work. However, as Weeks points out, by turning away from the equitable "market sphere of exchange," which conceptualizes work as a personal and equal model of exchange between labor and capital and looking into the "privatized sphere of production," we can recognize the *social construction* of work and begin to analyze it as a political rather than personal problem (6). "To publicize the world of waged work" is "to expose it as neither natural precursor nor peripheral byproduct of capitalist production, but rather as its central mechanism (the wage) and lifeblood (work)" (Weeks 6). This Bellamy unwittingly affords his readers through his unguarded representation of labor under nationalized capitalism.

Bellamy's allegiance to laborism becomes especially apparent when presented in parallel with Howells' more radical vision of utopia. Howells does away with "labor in capitalism" entirely, instead opting for a system of *action* that tolerates work for necessity at its more primitive level. Undeniably, this opens up his system to criticism, as Jean Pfaelzer does, as a pastoral delusion that grounds utopian paradise in a nostalgic, prelapsarian ideal that never existed; however, such a reading is the result of a misguided understanding of how Howells is trying to reimagine work. Again, we focus so intently on the system that we fail to question the mechanisms that keep it in motion. While Bellamy's novel is ensconced in the traditional

Marxian view of capitalism *from the standpoint of* labor, Howells is attempting to comment from outside the system entirely, and thus is able to launch a critique *of* labor in capitalism. For Howells, neither the means of distribution nor the means of production prove satisfactory. Rather, as Howells demonstrates through Altruria, an entirely new system of thinking is necessary. It is for this reason that both Bellamy and Howells' texts prove so vital to our understanding of both work at the fin de siècle, especially as it informs the progressive turn in the twentieth century, and how entrenched capitalist conceptions of work fundamentally inform the American psyche.

"As Inoperative as the Sanctions of a Dream": Reception of *Looking Backward* and *A Traveler from Altruria*

To write of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* as a significant work of the late nineteenth century would be to undersell the cultural relevance of his novel as both the singular utopian work of the fin de siècle and a perennial object of intellectual fascination that remains, even in the twenty-first century, an influential work of utopian thinking. While in its first edition *Looking Backward* sold modestly—according to Elizabeth Sadler it did not exceed ten thousand copies—during its second printing, published a year later in 1889, it evolved into a cultural sensation, becoming "the second novel published in the United States to sell a million copies" after Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Sadler 530; Beaumont, Introduction vii). At the same time that it climbed the literary charts, it inspired numerous imitations and rebuttals, with one scholar citing roughly sixty-two novels published between 1889 and 1900, including

Howells' *Altruria*, with direct ties to Bellamy's work (Kumar 135).[5] According to Pfaelzer, "the financial and political success of *Looking Backward* encouraged over a hundred other authors to turn their own blueprints for the future into books, pamphlets, and newspaper serials." "Not since *Jane Eyre*," Pfaelzer contends, "had there been a text more widely imitated in American popular fiction" (41). Considering the deceptively similar titles of many of the utopias that came out after Bellamy's novel, Pfaelzer's claim appears to stand true. To Name only a few, the list of imitators and respondents include *A.D. 2000* (1890) by Alvarado M. Fuller, *Looking Further Backward* (1890) by Arthur Dudley Vinton, *A Sequel to Looking Backward, or 'Looking Further Forward* (1891) by Richard Michaelis, and *Looking Ahead!* (1892) by Alfred Morris.[6] In fact, Bellamy's novel has seeped so thoroughly into the American intellectual discourse of utopian thinking that it functions as the basis for Frederic Jameson's 2016 treatise, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, in which he calls Bellamy "the tutelary deity of the universal army and its infrastructure" (81).

The popularity and prestige of Bellamy's novel does not mean that it was initially welcomed with open arms. On the contrary, like most works that propose a radical reconsideration of American capitalism, *Looking Backward* was divisive. For the reviewer from *The Atlantic*, Bellamy's novel suffers from a general weakness of intellect that fails to execute its sociological thrust. According to the author, Leete's explanation of utopia lacks vital consideration for the mulish immutability of "human nature" and provides insufficient logistical

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[5] Bellamy's novel was, inarguably, an international hit, especially in Russia, where it was translated by Leo Tolstoy. The novel was so popular that "Tsarist authorities . . . banned it in public libraries and reading rooms . . . [and] prevented the Russian publication of its successor, *Equality* (1897), for over a decade" (Kumar 135).

[6] One of the more interesting books often included in lists of Bellamy imitators is John Macnie's *The Diothas*, which was actually published five years before *Looking Backward*. Macnie's novel shares a distinctly similar plot with *Looking Backward*, so much so that Macnie accused Bellamy of plagiarism. Unfortunately, when *The Diothas* was re-released in 1890 under the title *Looking Forward; Or, The Diothas*—an attempt by the publisher to appeal to readers infatuated with Bellamy's best-selling novel—Macnie was the one accused of plagiarizing Bellamy, and is now often cited, if he is cited at all, as one of the imitators that followed in the wake of Bellamy's success.

details concerning the shift from the "wretched nineteenth century" to the "optimistic socialism" of the future. Additionally, Julian, as a representative of the nineteenth century, puts up a "feeble defense" against Leete's weak arguments for a socialist paradise: "if we were called on to send an advocate [for the nineteenth century] into the latter end of the twentieth century we should choose one who would not be bowled over so easily" ("Recent").

One may well imagine William T. Harris as the sturdy advocate of nineteenth-century capitalism that *The Atlantic* reviewer had in mind. In a lengthy critique of *Looking Backward*, Harris excoriates Bellamy's novel—which he categorizes as "a product of imagination and not the result of inquiry into existing facts"—for what he perceives to be its fundamental implausibility. To Harris, who derives much of his criticism from a conservative sense of capitalism's incontrovertible value to American society, *Looking Backward* represents a direct attack on American democracy and its inveterate interest in protecting individual liberty. By abolishing the constructive power of economic "self-denial" and entrepreneurial "individualism," Harris contends, Bellamy's utopian future "would prove in fact more repressive to individual development than any despotism of which we have any knowledge in recent times" (207). For this, Bellamy's argument is not only unconscionable, but also indefensible.[7]

Like Harris, William Higgs finds Bellamy's presentation of an altruistic utopia deeply flawed; however, Higgs presents a far more tempered argument. Devoid of Harris' patriotic fervor, Higgs focuses on Bellamy's assurance that selfishness will be eradicated by a harmonious shift in national logic. "If a perusal of the history of the manifold attempts to ameliorate the condition of human life teaches us anything at all," Higgs writes, "it assuredly teaches us this:

[7] The illogic of William T. Harris' argument is best represented by his understandable inability to comprehend the reality of inflation, which leads him to assure his reader that by the year 2000, $2.50 will be the daily productive power of an individual worker. A quota that will ensure "the average poor family in A.D. 2000" will be "as well off as Mr. Bellamy supposes to be the case under his nationalistic syndicate" (206).

that the cupidity of man refuses to be washed away in rosewater, and that its septicity is one incapable of being sprayed into healthfulness with frangipani." Without proper consideration for this fundamental error in his logic, Higgs judges Bellamy's remedy "defective" (233). Higgs further presses the ethics of Bellamy's utopia, questioning, like Harris, the logic of centralizing so much power within the federal government and the cultural implications of suppressing individuality to the collective. Yet, unlike Harris, Higgs is uninterested in the economic implications of it all. Rather, he is concerned with the creative challenges within Bellamy's system, and its potential to stifle creativity. Ultimately, although Higgs applauds Bellamy's intention, noting that "the end it seeks is one which it is impossible that the Christian consciousness can look upon indifferently," he finds the project "as inoperative as the sanctions of a dream" (234).

For Howells, *Looking Backward*'s dream-like impracticality is precisely the point. While Howells is apprehensive to take too firm a stance in support of the novel's politics, he is undeniably enticed by Bellamy's vision of a socialist utopian future. Unsurprisingly, Howells, as the leading proponent of realism in American fiction, tempers his review of Bellamy's *Looking Backward* for *Harper's* by defining it as "pure romance," which excuses its lack of story and slight characters (154). In this sense, Howells echoes the sentiments of the other reviewers; however, for Howells, Bellamy's flight of fancy allows the reader to "concede the premises, as in a poem, and after that you can hold the author only to a poetic consistency; he has no allegiance to the waking world." While this may sound like a condescending remark from an author preoccupied with the realist mode of literary fiction, Howells actually posits this as *Looking Backward*'s definitive strength. For Howells, the novel's ability to take on "the sugar-coated form of a dream" makes it the ideal medium to deliver "undiluted socialism" (154). Given the

requisite spoonful of sugar, the ideology is easily "gulped by some of the most vigilant opponents of that theory without a suspicion of the poison they were taking into their systems." It is the improbability of Bellamy's romantic novel that, to Howells, makes it so powerful.

What is perhaps the most impressive measure of *Looking Backward*'s cultural imprint is the formation of the Nationalist clubs across both the United States and Europe, which were directly inspired by Bellamy's novel. Formed in 1888 from a Boston book club comprised of retired officers who found Bellamy's military-style government inspiring, the movement grew to between 5,000 and 10,000 members at its peak.[8] The clubs began modestly with the intention of spreading the word of Bellamy's book through lectures and discussion classes, essentially embodying a kind of fan club for Bellamy, with Bellamy serving as honorary vice president. But once the organization grew more politically engaged in its efforts to pursue real social change, Bellamy took a more active role. These efforts manifested in 1891 when Nationalist candidates ran campaigns in two California districts and filled an entire state ticket in Rhode Island (Sadler 537). Although none of the candidates won, these efforts toward political representation led the Nationalist party to merge with the Populist Party to make a respectable third-party run for office (538). While it would be unrealistic to suggest that Nationalism significantly moved the political needle in the United States, it is worth recognizing Bellamy's influence on the political landscape of the late nineteenth century.[9]

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[8] The broad range of members provided comes from the amalgamation of two sources that provide drastically different statistics. While I cannot say for certain what caused such a large discrepancy, I do wonder if it is a result of the unorganized nature of the Nationalist clubs. According to Arthur Lipow, there were between 5,000 and 6,000 members, organized into 165 clubs (120). Jean Pfaelzer claims there were 10,000, comprising 140 chapters (41). It is possible that the numbers vary because of the year of in which they were counted. Lipow's data appears to come from a report published in 1889, while Pfaelzer sets the date as 1894. To further complicate matters, Elizabeth Sadler claims that there were "four thousand Bellamy societies throughout the United States and several hundred in Holland, Denmark, and Sweden prior to 1900" (536).

[9] For an in-depth discussion of Nationalism's political ramifications, see Arthur Lipow's *Authoritarian Socialism in America: Edward Bellamy and the Nationalist Movement* (1982) and Elizabeth Sadler's "One Book's Influence: Edward Bellamy's 'Looking Backward'" (1944).

This kind of enervative response to Bellamy's novel seems to explain Howells' willingness to set aside realism to write his own utopian romance. While there is only conjecture as to why Howells briefly departed from realism to write the Altrurian trilogy—most contend that Howells simply surrendered to the "romance revival" that was sweeping the late nineteenth century—I subscribe to Rafael Walker's proposition that Howells weaponized, rather than conceded to, the romance craze of the period to "deliver his controversial message to the audience that, in his view, needed it most" (287).[10] Embracing the tactics of Bellamy's "sugar-coated" assault on American capitalist sensibilities via the surreality of a dream, Howells set out to draft his own political diatribe under the fantastical pretense of speculative fiction. The results of his efforts were mixed.

On the whole, reviewers lauded Howells' commentary on American greed while criticizing the logic of his socialist paradise. In a somewhat dismissive review for *The Dial*, C.R. Henderson applauds Howells' gracious "picture of a future perfect society" for its capacity to expose the faults in American society without disparaging its readers: "Mr. Howells's Altrurian traveller [sic] leaves us angry at his rebukes, but reflecting on our deeds. Not in vain has he visited this green earth; not in cruelty and wrath has he rudely shocked our apathetic complacency" (154). Similarly, in *The Nation*, *Traveler* was met with resistance by a reviewer who found Howells' presentation of the United States and its Altrurian futurity presumptuous and cartoonish. While the reviewer accepts "Mr. Howells's severe and on the whole just arraignment of the American nation," they rightly point up Howells' reticence in the novel to

[10] For representative claims that Howells surrendered his realist convictions, see Thomas Peyser's *Utopia & Cosmopolis: Globalization in the Era of American Literary Realism* (1998), p. 111; and Rob Davidson's *Master and the Dean: The Literary Criticism of Henry James and William Dean Howells* (2005), p. 144. Rafael Walker also addresses other scholars who attribute Howells' Altruria novels to his surrender to the romance revival of the late nineteenth century.

elaborate on the genesis of Altruria as a glaring ellipsis in the logic of his utopian argument and further faults Howells for using Homos as self-evident proof of the Altrurian potentiality of the United States (Review). The reviewer sees in Howells' suggestion that the working-class possesses an innate goodness the implausibility of Howells' vision. Evoking the historical consistency of the "proletariat" to elect "corrupt and vicious men to control public affairs," the reviewer wonders how voting habits will abruptly change toward egalitarian and revolutionary ends (107).

The logistical failings of the novel prove inconsequential to Marrion Wilcox, who, in her review for *Harper's*, lauds Howells' "ingenious, placating romance" for its "unsparing criticism," which is nevertheless "helpful and suggestive." Like Henderson, who concedes the "prophetic spirit" at work in Howells' novel, Wilcox contends that Howells' novel should be recognized as one the great utopian novels of history alongside More, Bacon, and Campanella. Wilcox even goes so far as to remind her reader that "Sir Thomas More's delightful book . . . could not even be printed in England in the reign of Henry VIII.; and whereas More called attention to the atrocity of hanging a man for stealing the value of a shilling, two hundred years passed before people generally awoke to the fact that it was atrocious" (475). And yet, or perhaps precisely as Wilcox predicted, Howells' utopia never garnered the same fervid devotion that assured Bellamy's place in the pantheon of utopian thinkers. Two hundred years on, and Howells' utopian trilogy is still viewed as the aberrant and oft ignored works of his oeuvre. Even with Bellamy's tacit endorsement of *Traveler* as a "brilliant sketch of the promised land" of a nationalist future, it failed to inspire the reading public like Bellamy's novel did.

There is, I believe, a practical reason for why Howells' *Altrurian* trilogy failed to reach popularity where Bellamy's duology succeeded: Howells refuses to provide any concrete

blueprint for Altrurian society in *Traveler*, a quality of Bellamy's novel that proved paramount to its success. Throughout the novel, Homos is conspicuously evasive when asked about Altruria, often redirecting questions asked of him back at his interlocutor to gain further knowledge of American society. As a dialectical and satirical choice, this redirect makes sense, as it provides Howells opportunities to comment on and emphasize the absurdities of the inequalities of nineteenth century America through Homos' abhorrence at his American counterparts' apathy toward the socioeconomic disparities wrought by American capitalism. But as a means of conveying the potentialities of his utopian vision, it does very little. Too much like a dream upon waking, Altruria remains opaque and evanescent. Without an understanding of the Altrurian alternative to American capitalism, the reader is only obligated to agree with Homos' outrage in the abstract, which makes for a more agreeable but less compelling attack on the system. Even Homos' eventual lecture on Altruria, delivered as a kind of sermon on the mount at the novel's conclusion, wants for concreteness. It is not until *Through the Eye of the Needle*, published in 1907, that Howells reveals the systems of Altrurian governance to his readers, and by that point cultural interest in utopian imaginaries was long past.

Orthogenic Capitalism and Laborless Evolution

Bellamy conceives much of his utopian thinking through the framework of progressive evolution—also known as orthogenesis—which presumes organisms develop on a steady upward gradient of evolutionary advancement over time. Although orthogenesis as a concept was not formally introduced into the lexicon until 1893 by biologist Wilhelm Haacke, evolution was often presumed to be an innately progressive—and at times even benevolent—phenomenon that directed biological development toward positive ends. Positivist conceptions of evolution took

on particular prominence following the ascension of Herbert Spencer's "reassuring theory of progress based upon biology and physics," which posited that society would attain perfection through "the establishment of a stable, harmonious, completely adapted state" (Hofstadter 18, 24). This conception of evolutionary biology proved an effective anodyne for nineteenth-century anxieties concerning the state of the nation. In the wake of the Civil War, Henry Adams cynically writes of evolution as "a safe, conservative, practical, [and] thoroughly Common-Law deity" to justify the waste of "five or ten thousand million dollars and a million lives, more or less, to enforce unity and uniformity on people who objected to it" (qtd. in Hofstadter 3). Social worker and reformer Charles Loring Brace, who earnestly advocated the optimistic potential of evolution, perceived natural selection as an assurance that "evil must die ultimately as the weaker element" in the country's social makeup (qtd. in Hofstadter 3). It is ironic then that evolutionary theory was not always used to altruistic ends.

The theory of evolution also bred the "survival-of-the-fittest" conception of society that justified misanthropic self-interest as a worthy, even ideal, trait amongst Americans who were conditioned to view the world as a jungle of animalistic competition. William Graham Sumner, a disciple of Spencer and a representative figure of Social Darwinism, advanced the "tooth and claw" conception of society through a synthesis of Protestant ethics, classical economics, and natural selection to legitimize the laissez faire capitalism as the only means of preserving a strong and thriving (white) society. As Richard Hofstadter writes, Spencer emphatically believed that "the progress of civilization depends upon the selection process; and that in turn depends upon the workings of unrestricted competition." For Spencer and Sumner, competition was as natural as gravity and as unavoidable (43). Such views promulgated elitist, misogynistic, xenophobic, and racist theories of wealth and white supremacy that upheld capitalism as the only

system capable of weeding out inferior members of the population and in turn justified the dominance of wealthy white American men as a natural result of their inherent superiority.

Bellamy embraces these evolutionary theories to imagine how capitalism's evolution could usher in a new era of human perfectibility through the phenomenon of social eugenics. In a future in which men and women receive equal income for their labor and women possess full autonomy over their lives and bodies, a notably progressive aspect of both Bellamy and Howells' utopias, Leete explains to Julian, "the principle of sexual selection, with its tendency to preserve and transmit the better types of the race, and let the inferior types drop out, has unhindered operation" (*Looking* 156). In a world in which wealth and status mean nothing, the only measure of a man is his capacity to work and work well. As a result, men who do not possess adequate "creditably in the work of life" lead lives of celibacy (*Looking* 158). In keeping with the moral sanctity of work as a spiritual stimulant, Bellamy not only categorizes this kind of man, and the women who would dare marry and procreate with him, as a deterrent to the social progress of the nation, but he also moralizes that such a union is "evil" (158).

The more insidious implication of Bellamy's eugenics is the apparent designs on racial cleansing of non-whites through selective breeding. In addition to "sexual selection," utopian America has undergone a "race purification" about which Leete remains vague; in fact, this is the only explicit reference to the existence of non-white people in America in *Looking Backward* (156). Otherwise, the novel is entirely void of non-white characters. The only section of Bellamy's utopian blueprint that addresses another race in America is a brief section in *Equality* titled "The Colored Race and the New Order," in which he explains how he would regiment Black Americans into the strictures of a white society. Playing upon paternalistic stereotypes of the shiftless former slave, Leete explains to Julian that "the population of recent slaves was in

need of some sort of industrial regiment, at once firm and benevolent, administered under conditions which should meanwhile tend to educate, refine, and elevate its members" (364). To achieve this, Black Americans were trained under the "centralized discipline of the national industrial army," which, Leete chillingly explains, "furnished just the sort of a control—*gentle yet resistless*—which was needed by the recently emancipated bondsman (364-65; italics added). Echoing pro-slavery propaganda of the nineteenth century that insisted slavery was not only humane but beneficial to Black Americans, Bellamy envisions a neo-slave future where the recently freed become enslaved once again. While one might argue that Bellamy's parameters for Black Americans are no more rigid than those set for white citizens—and it is true that Bellamy sets no additional restrictions or obligations on Black members of the worker army—it is important to recognize that Bellamy explicitly sees this institutionalization as a more "civilizing agent" for the Black population than the white, which "had been further advanced" (365). Additionally, considering there are no Black characters in the novel, one must question the extent to which Black Americans had any say in their inclusion in Bellamy's utopian system, or whether Bellamy saw them as inherent under-achievers relegated to one of the low-skilled regiments of the army. Such a depiction, or lack thereof, of Black Americans trades on race anxieties concerning a free Black population that simultaneously resolves the "negro problem" in the US by erasing Black Americans from the utopian picture. Such depictions of America's future seem to accommodate racist desires for a future that restores the South's antebellum past.[11]

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[11] Unsurprisingly, Black writers also found utopian fiction an appealing mode in which to address racial issues. Sutton E. Griggs' *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), Pauline Hopkins' serialized novel *Of One Blood* (1902-03), and E.A. Johnson's *Light Ahead for the Negro* (1904) explore in divergent ways the potentiality for utopian racial equality in America. Griggs' novel has more in common with Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1907) than either *Looking Backward* or *Traveler* in that he contemplates the potential of a utopian future through the invention of a radical shadow organization of Black intellectuals in Texas intent on challenging the present political order of America. Of course, considering the implications of proposing a Black rebellion, the novel balks at any suggestion of outright

While one may think that the utopians' infatuation with classist and racist conceptions of evolution was merely the purview of speculative fiction, its pervasiveness in the culture is evidenced by the popularity of the Naturalist literary movement during the same period, which saw authors like Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, and Jack London rise to prominence. Although these writers were not all, especially London, supporters of capitalism, per se—Crane certainly had his critiques; see *The Octopus* (1901)—they often abide by the logic of Social Darwinism and place emphasis on their lower-class characters' roles in their own misery. Even when these authors intend to write sympathetically of the poor, they often perpetuate derogatory assumptions about genetically fatalistic poverty, such as Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893). London's Naturalist perception of society informed his own dystopian novel, *The Iron Heel* (1908), which envisions the utopian evolution of the United States as a brutal and bloody war for survival between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie that is, by the novel's end, left unresolved.[12] Although London abandons the more primal elements of Naturalist writing to detail the philosophical conflict between socialism and capitalism, the core concern is one of survival of the fittest.

Employing a concoction of both Darwinian and Spencerian evolutionary philosophy, utopian fiction of the period presents a wishful vision of an ascendent United States. In terms of national development, such thinking asserts that the United States would steadily improve through incremental refinements in capitalism and democracy, systems that were often presumed

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insurrection. Instead, it cleverly threads the needle between subtle threat and concessional diplomacy. Johnson possesses the more fantastical touch of Bellamy, imagining his protagonist flung into the future via a mysterious airship accident where he learns how America achieved racial harmony. Hopkins' work is a genre-blending operatic romantic adventure story that includes the occult, romance, ancient civilizations, and betrayal. Although the Nubian utopia of Telassar plays a tertiary part in the story, its presence evokes the wistful fantasies of an untouched African civilization.

[12] For a fuller representation of the discourse surrounding evolution in the nineteenth century, see Richard Hofstadter's *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915* (1944), especially chapter five, "Evolution, Ethics, and Society."

to be intertwined.[13] As Pfaelzer explains, for all the faith "late nineteenth-century utopians" placed in "a socialist future . . . inherent in the technological progress and class tensions of the epoch, they still assumed bourgeois attitudes toward change, believing in laissez-faire economics, social evolution, determinism, and the progressive tendencies of democracy and industrialization" (5). It is little surprise then that by the turn of the century, the progressive social movement prized work and order as the curative for America's moral maladies. Regardless of the ideological scaffolding used to construct the various utopian ideals, all shared the belief that "capitalism contained the seeds of its own perfection" (5). This is the result of Bellamy's faith in what Stanley Cooperman defines as "rational optimism," a figuration of humanity as innately good that insists that utopia is already emerging "from existing American society." Such assurances, Cooperman explains, result in a "real rather than ideal narrative" that attempts to work within existing—presumably rational—frameworks rather than imagine more fantastical ones that reach beyond the near horizon (465). Cooperman marks this desire to rationalize utopia as unique to "American futurist writing" of the nineteenth century, as opposed to earlier utopian literature that intentionally displaces utopia in both space and time to justify the invention of "the Ultimate Good." By insisting on the imminent plausibility of utopia, Cooperman explains, American utopians of the nineteenth century busied themselves with "practical problems" that often serve as justifications for existing systems (465).

The perfection of capitalism as a global phenomenon is presented in *Looking Backward* as the result of a new era of Western imperialism, with America leading the charge of a largely

[13] Bellamy's faith in the evolutionary potential of American capitalism seems the result of the convergence of two concordant ideas that took on new social relevance in the late nineteenth century. The first, addressed in the text, is a rise in popularity of Social Darwinism, and the second is a burgeoning sense of national pride following the Civil War. After the war, America shifted its national narrative from the surprisingly apocalyptic nihilism of the early nineteenth century toward an idealized vision of national perpetuity. For more on nineteenth-century visions of American apocalypse, see John Hay's *Apocalypse in American Literature and Culture* (2020).

white, Western coalition of Nationalist countries intent on delivering the "the more backward races" from their current state of barbarism (82). According to Leete:

> the great nations of Europe as well as Australia, Mexico, and parts of South America, are now organized industrially like the United States, which was the pioneer of the evolution. The peaceful relations of these nations are assured by a loose form of federal union of world-wide extent. An international council regulates the mutual intercourse and commerce of the members of the union and their joint policy toward the more backward races, which are gradually being educated up to civilized institutions. Complete autonomy within its own limits is enjoyed by every nation. (82)

In this imagined future, not only has America achieved industrial paradise, but it has also succeeded in spreading its gospel across the globe, revitalizing the spirit of Manifest Destiny on a global scale and achieving a level of ideological imperialism unheard of even in the twenty-first century. It should be noted that Bellamy does propose a globalist future in which all countries retain, at least in theory, full autonomy and receive equal respect in regard to global politics. And yet, praise must be tempered by the fact that such status appears to be bestowed on these "civilizing" nations by a white judiciary of Nationalist countries that determine the efficacy of these nations in perpetuating the Nationalist ethos. As such, Bellamy sees the spread of Nationalism across the globe as a means of achieving global hegemony. "You must understand," Leete explains to Julian, "that we all look forward to an eventual unification of the world as one nation. That, no doubt, will be the ultimate form of society, and will realize certain economic advantages over the present federal system of autonomous nations" (*Looking* 83-84). If we consider Leete's comments about "race purification" and the civilizing of "barbarous" nations,

one may deduce that Bellamy's vision of a global nation is, in reality, set on achieving global Western white supremacy.

These articulations of progressive capitalism were by no means the result of utopian writers' naivete regarding the class conflicts of their time. Rather, like the proletarian movement of the 1930s, the utopian boon of the late nineteenth century comes as a direct response to the turbulent social moment; however, unlike the radical writers of the thirties, who saw their art as a weapon intended to inspire class consciousness and undermine the hegemonic narrative of American capitalism, nineteenth-century utopians found themselves mediators between a dissident working class and an apathetic bourgeoisie. As Beaumont explains, nineteenth-century visions of utopia were consciously written as a "prophylactic" against growing class antagonism, functioning both to "allay the fears" of a middle class stricken by the possibility of proletarian revolution and "stimulate hopes that capitalism can be humanized" for a working class growing more openly rebellious ("Shopping in Utopia" 199, 200).

Starting in 1873 with the Long Depression, a more than five-year span of economic contraction that resulted in the United States' first national strike, the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, which was followed by the Haymarket Incident in 1886 and the Homestead Strike in 1892 along with numerous other smaller labor conflicts, the United States experienced more than two decades of volatile economic crises and labor unrest.[14] Subsequent panics in 1884, 1890, 1893, and 1896 left many Americans with a dread sense of the nation's future. These anxieties were compounded by a growing immigrant working-class population, which were perceived as a threat to native workers, and the formation of the first unions in the United States. As a means of

[14] The Long Depression is alternately viewed as a continuous, multi-decade depression that lasted from 1873 to 1896 and is thus considered the overarching economic event that triggered the smaller panics throughout the 1880s and 90s.

essentially "getting ahead" of the revolutionary discourse that began to arise at the time, utopian writers formulated utopian narratives that served to rehabilitate capitalism's image by refashioning it as a naturally evolving and egalitarian economic system that would inevitably reach a grand apotheosis.

By separating social change and human action, utopians undercut these tensions by positing a peaceful transition into social harmony that centers capitalism as the vital engine of progress.[15] Bellamy's assessment of capitalism's upward trajectory best exemplifies this thinking, as he presupposes that change will occur, or rather must occur, without human intervention. When Julian presses Leete to elaborate on how reformers achieved economic equality and solved the "labor question," Leete concedes that "it was not necessary for society to solve the riddle at all." Rather, "the solution came as the result of a process of *industrial evolution* which could not have terminated otherwise. All that society had to do was to recognize and cooperate with that evolution, when its tendency had become unmistakable" (*Looking* 22; emphasis added). Following this assertion, Leete puts forth to Julian the general history of capitalism's apotheosis, which casts consolidation—monopolization by a fairer name—as the natural process by which large corporations steadily consumed smaller, more inefficient, businesses too preoccupied with "petty concerns" and too "incompetent to the demands of an age of steam and telegraphs" to adapt to the changing pace of industry (25). Once this "logical evolution" of capitalism reached a critical mass of consolidation, the doorway to "a golden future" was opened by the ubiquitous agreement—by workers and capitalists alike—that all industry should be nationalized (26). Thus, Bellamy's labor utopia ironically presumes, considering the centrality of work in the novel, that there was little work necessary to arrive at a

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[15] Sympathetic views of capitalism also appear to have served the practical purpose of shielding utopian writers and their utopian ideals from political criticisms against socialist ideology.

perfect society—at least not on the part of the working class. Rather, all the changes come through shifts toward monopolization administered by the invisible hand of the capitalist class.[16]

Bellamy's vision of America's progressive future presumes that its brutal present is the product of a kind of social primitivity resulting from an underdeveloped capitalist system. This is codified in *Looking Backward* by the infamous "prodigious coach" allegory that Julian uses to explain the nineteenth century to his fictional twenty-first century audience. As a means of conceptualizing for his fictional reader a "general impression of the way people lived" in the nineteenth century, Julian allegorizing America as a "prodigious coach" driven by hunger "along a very hilly and sandy road." "The masses of humanity," Julian explains, were "harnessed to and dragged toilsomely" by the coach as it trundled down the path of progress, while the leisure class sat in comfort as passengers (4). Although Julian criticizes members of the leisure class, himself included, for assuming their favored place aboard the coach was the result of their "belonging to a higher order of beings who might justly expect to be drawn," he seems to insist that such grandiose imaginings, and the staggering inequality that they perpetuate, are the result of a system of economic governance that was inborn and immutable. As Julian explains in *Equality*, "though poor and rich in my day were at bitter odds in everything else, they were agreed in

[16] It should be recognized that Bellamy does make some concessions to his utopian logic in *Equality* by establishing a messier journey to America's utopian future, which demonstrates Bellamy's shift toward more radical politics and maturity as a critic of American capitalism. This shift is evidenced rhetorically by Bellamy's choice of *revolution* rather than *evolution* when describing the utopian transformation of the country. While Bellamy glosses the transition in *Looking Backward* as a spontaneous reification of the social will—"there was absolutely no violence. . . . Public opinion had become fully ripe for it, and the whole mass of people was behind it"—*Equality* concedes that "a great number of minor disturbances and collisions, involving in the aggregate a considerable amount of violence and bloodshed" was necessary to achieve utopia (*Looking Backward* 26; *Equality* 346-47). Insofar as Bellamy's emendation to the history of *Looking Backward* radicalizes his utopia, it also articulates a more dystopian understanding of humanity. Bellamy's rhetorical turn is accompanied by a growing interest in human progress manifest in the mechanization of human efficiency and behavior. This becomes particularly apparent in Bellamy's shifting conception of human instrumentality. While in *Looking Backward*, Bellamy saw avarice and sloth as innate conditions resulting from a genetic abnormality, in *Equality* these traits become malfunctions in need of repair. One wonder's if Bellamy's ontological shift reclassifies workers as automatons in need of reprogramming. For more on Bellamy's ideological shift from *Looking Backward* to *Equality*, see Nathaniel Cadle's "Imagining Equality in a Gilded Age: Edward Bellamy's Radical Utopian Critique of Progressivism" (2019).

believing that there must always be rich and poor, and that a condition of material equality was impossible" (2-3). In Julian's estimation, no one (or everyone) is at fault for the inequalities present in nineteenth-century America since society was driven along a pitted road at the behest of a primal urge, which compels individuals—regardless of class position—to compete endlessly for a prized seat atop the coach. Such a treatment of society unburdens the ruling class of any responsibility for the tumultuous state of the economy and perpetuates the fantasy of Alger-esque upward mobility, making the brutality of capitalism a burden and potential boon for all to suffer and share in equally. This characterization of American capitalism coheres nicely with Bellamy's vision of a cooperative future, yet it also avoids assigning blame to anyone for the grievous state of affairs. Instead, it posits inequality as "the miserable condition of *the mass of humanity*," a universalism that conveys a grand concern for his national brothers and sisters—all lives, in Bellamy's eyes, matter—that, by its very breadth, excoriates the distinctive sufferings of the working class (Bellamy, "Why" 199; emphasis added).

This view of society leads to a troubling equivocation of social suffering in both *Looking Backward* and *Equality*, as characters treat the moneyed class of the nineteenth century with far greater sympathy and reverence than the working poor. While discussing the inefficiency of nineteenth-century employment practices with Leete, Julian laments that the majority of moneyed men "were forced by circumstances into work for which they were relatively inefficient" due to "social prejudice" that forbade them from pursuing the "manual avocations" to which they may have been better suited (*Looking* 64). Here Bellamy coopts the language of social immobility to staggeringly audacious effect, evoking *circumstance* and *prejudice* to garner sympathy for the people who demarcated the rigid class boundaries of the country. One may assume that such a claim is the residue of Julian's nineteenth-century class bias, which the Leete

family would work to correct over the novel; however, this class animosity is affirmed by Leete and Edith, who confide to Julian that people of the twenty-first century hold much sympathy for the "rich and cultured." Leete explains: "I know that the poor and ignorant envied the rich and cultured then; but to us the latter, living as they did, surrounded by squalor and brutishness, seem little better off than the former" (103). In the eyes of Edith, the poor represent the ignorant masters of the nineteenth century, "who with supreme power in their hands consented to be bondsmen" (*Equality* 15). In this conception of the nineteenth century social order, the poor "deserve not compassion but contempt" (15). Such an understanding of the nineteenth century presents the disarray of American capitalism as a result of the patients running the asylum, with the wealthy obligated to order the chaos and suffer under the social disharmony. The workers appear too incompetent to warrant much sympathy.

Paradise Deferred: Howells' Theory of the Beautiful and the Picturesque

Howells lays out a far more skeptical and subversive theory of social progress in his Altruria novels. Unlike many of the other utopian novelists of the nineteenth century, Howells resists the urge to set his fiction in a future America thriving in a state of socialist bliss.[17] Rather, Howells imagines a remote and idyllic nation-state believed by many to be a legend of national harmony. Unlike Bellamy, who insists that the seed of a utopian future is already planted in the economic soil of the nineteenth-century US, Howells positions social equality as a potentiality that is, at the time of his writing, deferred, significant for its unwillingness to assure readers that America is progressing toward utopia. Howells' more caustic opinions of American society are

[17] Charlotte Perkins Gilman constructs a similar kind of Edenic utopia in *Herland* (1915), which is set in an isolated part of an unnamed exotic land "up where the maps had to be made, savage dialects studied, and all manner of strange flora and fauna expected" (2).

best represented in his iteration of the "prodigious coach" allegory in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889). Basil March, the novel's protagonist, decries the brutal competitiveness of America as a violent tumult: "we go on, pushing and pulling, climbing and crawling, thrusting aside and trampling underfoot; lying, cheating, stealing; and when we get to the end, covered with blood and dirt and sin and shame, and look back over the way we've come to a palace of our own, or the poorhouse, which is about the only possession we can claim in common with our brother-men, I don't think the retrospect can be pleasing" (437). While March's lament sounds similar to Julian's, March recognizes the important interaction between humanity and nature that Julian neglects. "We can't put it all on the conditions," March contends, "we must put some of the blame on character. But conditions *make* character" (437). By this admission, March recognizes the personal responsibility that people have toward the perpetuation of this behavior, a greed and selfishness that is passed on generationally.

This does not mean that Howells avoids the orthogenic tropes of socialist utopianism altogether. While Altruria is a place that exists at the fin de siècle, a choice that circumvents the awkward contrivance of Bellamy's nineteenth-century-obsessed twenty-first century America, it cannot resist the Darwinian impulse to articulate national reconstruction as an evolutionary process. Similar to Bellamy, Howells presents Altruria as the final form of a state organism that evolved from a capitalist nation to a socialist utopia by way of progressive monopolization, even calling his conglomeration of industry "The Accumulation"—a la Bellamy's consolidation—and describing the move from capitalism to socialist utopianism as "the Evolution" (*Traveler* 260, 266). However, what marks Howells' conception of social change different from Bellamy's is his focus on the people as an agent of change, rather than capitalism itself, as Bellamy does. The Accumulation, initially representative of the consumerist drive to amass wealth and property,

metastasized throughout Altruria under the promise of "prosperity, and wealth, and the public good," and ultimately evolved into industrial monopolization once it gained what Homos describes as "consciousness of the lie always at its heart": That monopolization, not competition, is the key to exponential wealth (*Traveler* 260, 262). In this sense, Howells has already made a far more critical claim against capitalism than Bellamy ever did, as his commentary refuses the artifice of capitalism as a means to obtaining social equity. Rather, Howells threads the ideological needle by positing that consolidation is both the true primeval of capitalism—via monopolization—and the ideal method for achieving economic equality—via communalism. Importantly, in Howells' process of utopianizing, the workers of Altruria must combat The Accumulation by forming a national union, much like the one the IWW fought for in the early twentieth century, to wrest control back from The Accumulation through suffrage (268). In this sense, Howells inverts Bellamy's correlation between human engagement and social progress by presenting utopian advancement along the line of increased worker activism. As a result, Howells' utopian vision remains skeptical of naturalist justifications of wealth distribution and class hierarchy that defend capitalism and the inequality it produces as organic byproducts of human nature. Rather, Howells recognizes the distinctly human role in either producing social change or, in the case of nineteenth-century America, perpetuating social stratification and its accompanying inequality.

Howells reminds us that society is literally a construct, made material in the architecture of American cities, and that the conditions established by such constructs are at the root of our social ills. As Howells observes in an article penned for *Century Illustrated Magazine* in 1895, "it seems to me that we are always mistaking our conditions for our natures, and saying that human nature is greedy and mean and false and cruel, when only its conditions are so. We say

you must change human nature if you wish to have human brotherhood, but we really mean that you must change human conditions, and this is quite feasible" ("Equality" 67). This is perhaps best depicted in Homos' observation on urban design in the *Letters of an Altrurian Traveller* series Howells wrote for *Cosmopolitan* between 1893-94.[18] In this epistolary series, which constitutes the second "book" of the Altruria series, Howells sends Homos to New York City and Chicago, where he corresponds with an Altrurian friend named Cyril. Like Bellamy's *Equality*, the letters elaborate on themes Howells addresses in *A Traveler from Altruria*; and like Bellamy's second novel, the letters lose some of their literary quality. Yet, the unidirectionality of the epistolary mode softens the shift in style and provides a logical foundation for Howells' essayistic conceit. While Bellamy must contrive a number of lectures for Julian to attend in *Equality* to justify his expanded diatribes on the problems of the nineteenth century, Howells presents a fairly eloquent mode of elaboration through the letter format. Interestingly, some of the letters expand upon themes Howells glosses in his other writings. For example, Homos' ruminations in letter IV, which I will be drawing from in this section, regarding the architecture of poverty in New York was originally used in chapter IX of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* when the Marches search for a place to live in the city.

In a series of letters on the Chicago World's Fair and New York City, Homos produces an extended meditation on the distinction between the beautiful and the picturesque to present an aesthetic argument against the assumption that capitalism, and its hierarchy of economic classes, is a natural extension of human nature. Rather, as both cities represent human constructions, albeit the White City an impermanent one, they show the human role in achieving or withholding

[18] The Altrurian Letters are often left out of discussion of Howells' Altruria series, likely due to the difficulty in finding them. While online repositories have made this less of a challenge, they still remain under researched. In 1968, Indiana University Press released a collected volume titled *The Altrurian Romance*, which contains the two novels and the *Cosmopolitan* pieces in a single volume.

social utopianism.[19] In his distinction between the picturesque and the beautiful, Howells makes a clear argument for active intervention in constructing social equality. Far from something that is shaped by cycles of progressive evolution, as Bellamy presents, social equality must be generated and propagated by direct action. He does this by specifically calling attention to the difference between natural formations, which produce by their innate imperfections asymmetrical picturesqueness, and human creations, which he contends should be, as a result of the human intentionality behind their production, symmetrically beautiful. For Homos, the White City, which he compares aesthetically to Altruria, with its neoclassical emphasis on simplicity and symmetry, embodies the ideal vision of social equality, whereas New York City, as the physical construction of capitalist picturesqueness, represents the intentionality behind inequality through its inconsistency in architectural quality.

Describing the poor quarters of New York City, Homos articulates the nefarious charm of their asymmetry, which derives from their similarity to pastoral imagery. Comparing the irregularity of the tenement houses to the uniformity of brownstones, Homos notes the visual energy of the former: "The fronts of the edifices are decorated with the iron balconies and ladders of the fire-escapes, and have in the perspective a false air of gayety, which is travestied in their rear by the lines thickly woven from the windows to the tall poles set between the backs of the houses, and fluttering with drying clothes as with banners" (59). In contrast, Homos warms to the "regularity" of the brownstones of fifth avenue, "which recalls to one, if it does not actually give again, the pleasure we get from the symmetry at home" (57). Although Homos

[19] While Howells interpretation of utopian neo-classical Chicago appears more altruistic in its intentions than Bellamy's mechanical Boston, the letters from the White City elide the troubling realities of the World's Fair and its construction. David Silkenat provides a categorical account of how nomadic workers, which comprised the majority of the workers at the fair, were treated before, during, and after the World's Fair. In contrast to the idealized visions of the fair perpetuated by Howells, and many others, workers' accounts of their experience in the park underscore the perpetuation and intensification of the same abuses that plagued workers across the country.

criticizes Fifth Avenue for its deference to the bland homogeneity of a business-like uniformity, he recognizes "a sort of unlovely and forbidding beauty" of its cleanliness and order, which exudes a feeling of social harmony (57). In contrasting these two images of the city, Howells exposes the harmful aesthetic charm of poverty, which is only accepted within the safe bounds of a photograph. "In a picture," Homos explains, "it would be most pleasingly effective, for then you could be in it, and yet have the distance on it which it needs. But, to be in it, and not have the distance, is to inhale the stenches of the neglected street, and to catch that yet fouler and dreadfuller poverty-smell which breathes from the open doorways" (59). In defining nineteenth-century American capitalist society as picturesque, Homos calls out the illogic of economic inequality. The picturesque, for Homos, defines a deceptively idyllic image, like the rustic pastoral, that exploits the impoverished and justifies and naturalizes the economic inequality in America by reimagining the aesthetics of poverty as the natural (asymmetrical) features of a naturally occurring capitalist world. Importantly, this idealism glorifies economic imbalance as the charming quaintness of a naturally occurring biome of the urban ecology. Not only does this capitalist logic insist that such dire conditions represent an organic feature of American society, making any suggestion of changing them tantamount to changing the very landscape of humanity, but it also presents it in such appealing ways that an outside viewer would be hard pressed to argue that it could, or should, be improved.

The very presence of the picturesque in the construction of social hierarchy demonstrates the intentionality behind economic inequality. If, as Homos' commentary on working-class residences suggests, the naturalistic vision of American capitalism is the artificial construction of the bourgeoisie to maintain the status quo and reify a class-based hierarchy predicated on idealized notions of economic individualism, then how can it be possible for the United States to

achieve Altrurian transcendence without the active hands of reformers or revolutionaries? What is perhaps more troubling to Homos is that this American conception of social order has been so thoroughly habituated into its citizens that they unquestioningly believe that it is the pinnacle of democratic governance, even when its very existence demands the sublimation of the working-class.

"Absolutely Natural and Reasonable": The Gospel of Work in The Year 2000

The naturalization of capitalistic work habits is the fundamental principle of Bellamy's utopia. Because of Bellamy's faith in industrial *production*, as opposed to capitalist *distribution*, he retains many of the moral assumptions about work that serve to rationalize capitalism's commodification of the worker. This comes from Bellamy's perpetuation of the work ethic as it was heralded by middle-class professionals and business owners, a creed celebrated for its capacity to discipline and regulate workers. Work ethic, as Daniel Rodgers points out, "was in its origins a middle-class affair," championed by the professional class, and later became the preeminent "faith of those who owned and managed the mills—of those whose comfortable houses climbed the hills above the factories and the cramped and pinched dwellings of the workers they employed" (153). This should perhaps be our first warning sign that Bellamy's utopian vision is not as conducive to worker liberation and autonomy as he suggests. Bellamy seems to view work from this same middle-class vantage, looking down with suspicion upon the working masses from on high.

Bellamy's top-down view of work is presented quite explicitly early in the novel when Julian wakes from his century-long slumber. In an effort to convince Julian that he did in fact sleep into the next millennium, Leete brings him out onto the balcony to observe firsthand the

transformation that the city has undergone. In situating Julian and Leete above the industrial city, Bellamy literalizes the social hierarchy of the nineteenth century by reinstalling Julian, the capitalist, and Leete, the middle-class moralist, to their rightful places as supervisors over the industrial bustle below. This seems to be Bellamy's assurance to his readers that for all the changes that Boston has undergone, the two stalwart, sensible figures of American capitalism remain in their proper place. This is further emphasized by Julian's recognition of the geological landmarks of Boston, which help to stabilize him as he looks upon the disorienting changes to the city. Looking westward, Julian recognizes the "sinuous Charles" and the various "green islets" that dapple the landscape (22). This tension between the evolved city and perennial nature concretizes Bellamy's conception of the evolving capitalist society, a society that has changed radically but remains firmly situated on a bedrock of nineteenth-century ideology. For all the aesthetic changes to the city, the same topography remains underneath.

Extending the evolutionary logic of orthogenic capitalism to his conception of the worker, Bellamy envisions a citizenry simultaneously predetermined and conditioned to understand themselves as components of the national machine. This is expressed in the novel through the naturalization of work, which Leete articulates, paradoxically, as both a primal urge and a trained response. When Julian asks Leete if service in the industrial army is "compulsory upon all," Leete responds in the affirmative, but assures Julian that "it is rather a matter of course than of compulsion":

> It is regarded as so absolutely natural and reasonable that the idea of its being compulsory has ceased to be thought of. He would be thought to be an incredibly contemptible person who should need compulsion in such a case. Nevertheless, to speak of service being compulsory would be a weak way to state its absolute inevitableness. Our entire social

> order is so wholly based upon and deduced from it that if it were conceivable that a man could escape it, he would be left with no possible way to provide for his existence. He would have excluded himself from the world, cut himself off from his kind, in a word, committed suicide. (37)

Leete's statement utilizes the dual logics of biology ("so absolutely natural") and rationality ("reasonable") to justify the industrial pressures put upon humans to conceive of themselves as innately workers. By positing that work is both a natural component of and a reasonable request upon the human condition, Bellamy aggrandizes the dehumanizing logic of capitalism into the self-evident and honorable doctrine of his Nationalist new world order. What is especially troubling about Leete's conceptualization of service in the industrial army is its all-consuming nature on an existential level. Envisioning work as an inevitability, Bellamy leaves no room for individuality to transgress the boundaries of social obligation. Work is defined by its "absolute inevitableness," and thus becomes the *only* platform upon which identity can be articulated. Through such a logic, all facets of life become extensions of work and work becomes the lens through which all existential decisions are made. In fact, as Leete so bluntly presents it, life without work is akin to death.

Although Leete assures Julian that workers are essentially guaranteed placement in their preferred job, with some caveats, the realities of employment caps and demand would suggest that not all workers are going to receive their hoped-for occupation. Leete does explain that citizens are encouraged to select potential secondary jobs in case their first choice is unavailable, but he elides the uglier question of how drudgery is assigned. Bellamy suggest that disabled citizens are given appropriate work, although he is vague in his meaning, and there is the corps of undeclared workers who never selected a profession during their time in school. It is likely

that these workers are assigned the truly toilsome duties, especially considering Bellamy's loaded language when describing those who do not choose a profession: "If a man were so stupid as to have no choice as to occupation, he would simply remain a common laborer" (*Looking* 42). And while Leete makes the dubious moral argument that it is their own failings that result in their grueling work, if one considers the issue from a postwork perspective, the protocol takes on a darker meaning. Bellamy does not specify why a worker would not want to select a profession to specialize in, this is likely because he cannot reconcile what else a person would want to do with their time, but if we are granted a bit of leniency in our analytical assumptions, we can suppose that some of these undeclared workers are people who were resistant to the social conditioning administered to them. As such, their role in society amounts to service in a labor prison.

On the other hand, the placidity of social life in utopian Boston implies that most citizens have fully surrendered themselves to the rationale of Bellamy's dictum. While the law is on the books, Leete explains, it has become so pervasive that nobody really contemplates its existence. All facets of life—social, cultural, political, theological—revolve around the productive potential of the citizen worker. In this sense, Bellamy has achieved the perfect labor system from a capitalist perspective, in that he has conditioned his workers into a state of complete submission to the demands of industry. Julian eventually learns that this is achieved through both mandatory attendance at the public technical schools, which teach citizens "habits of obedience, subordination, and devotion to duty," and the looming threat of imprisonment or exile if one refuses assimilation (*Looking* 72).[20] This, it seems, is vital to a system of national industry that

[20] Bellamy's punishment for citizens who refuse to participate in the industrial army changes from *Looking Backward* to *Equality*, but both articulate the cruel rigidity of his system. Should a citizen neglect to work, produce poor work, or exhibit some "other overt remissness on the part of men incapable of generous motives, the discipline of the industrial army is far too strict to allow anything whatever of the sort. A man able to do duty, and persistently

understands its citizens not as people but as industrial automatons "to be distributed according to the needs of industry" (*Looking* 36).

Unsurprisingly, nineteenth-century workers' conception of work was far more complicated and adversarial than Bellamy would have readers believe, and often represented an antagonistic force at odds with their efforts to cultivate a sense of selfhood apart from their work. While some workers agreed with employers that work was a fundamental virtue of life, a greater majority saw it in turn as a means to an end and an existential threat that needed to be managed and consolidated into the smallest portion of daily life. In *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (1974), Daniel Rodgers categorizes worker resistance to regimented labor in the nineteenth century into three broad modes of rebellion: "By reporting irregularly for work, moving restlessly from job to job, or engaging in slowdowns and work restrictions, industrial laborers stubbornly resisted the new work discipline the factory masters tried to impose upon them" (155). These habits and attitudes toward work manifested politically in the national campaigns by workers to shorten the workday, which both preceded and occurred simultaneously with the publication of *Looking Backward*. Beginning in the 1840s, workers began demanding shorter workdays, and by the 1880s it appeared to be *the* fundamental issue for most labor reformers and unions (Rodgers 156-57).

In the few instances where workers' feelings toward work and leisure have been recorded, they often express a desire for "leisure not as a means but as an end in itself" (Rodgers

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refusing, is sentenced to solitary imprisonment on bread and water till he consents" (*Looking* 74-75). In *Equality*, Bellamy appears to satirize the myth of rugged individualism by casting defective citizens out of society to fend for themselves: "If an adult, being neither criminal nor insane, should deliberately and fixedly refuse to render his quota of service in any way, either in a chosen occupation or, on failure to choose, in an assigned one, he would be furnished with such a collection of seeds and tools as he might choose and turned loose on a reservation expressly prepared for such persons, corresponding a little perhaps with the reservations set apart for such Indians in your day as were unwilling to accept civilization. There he would be left to work out a better solution of the problem of existence than our society offers, if he could do so" (*Equality* 41).

159). A New Jersey miner, writing in 1881 to the state bureau of labor statistics, criticized the current work regiment as antithetical to God's will: "I do not believe that God ever create man in order to spend his life in work and sleep, without any time to enjoy the pleasures of the world" (qtd. in Rodgers 159). This sentiment was echoed by a Pennsylvania worker who lamented the dehumanization that comes with knowing "nothing but work, eat and sleep." Such an existence was to live a "little better than a horse" (qtd. in Rodgers 160). These anxieties toward work's all-consuming nature were exacerbated by the implementation of Frederick Taylor's system of scientific management, which turned the abstract "gospel of work" into a practical methodology of extracting as much work as possible through time-study exercises meant to condition workers to move with utmost efficiency. With a worker's every movement being evaluated and martialed into rote behavior, autonomy, and its tenuousness in the face of all-consuming labor, became a central concern for workers (Rodgers 167). A machinist who debated Taylor in 1914 summarizes the general frustration of workers pushed to work endlessly under Taylorism when he stated, "We don't want to work as fast as we are able to. We want to work as fast we think it's comfortable for us to work. we haven't come into existence for the purpose of seeing how great a task we can perform through a lifetime. We are trying to regulate our work so as to make it an auxiliary to our lives" (qtd. in Rodgers 168). While Bellamy's writing predates the implementation of Taylorism by more than a decade, his labor system should be understood in communication with scientific management, as much of Bellamy's thinking on utopian work revolves around the mechanization of his work force.

In both *Looking Backward* and *Equality* Bellamy embraces the promise of industrial mechanization to imagine a world in which human workers are optimized into precision components of the "great machine" that is the United States (*Equality* 88). In fact, this "vast

machinery of human association" (88) has been so thoroughly optimized, Leete brags to Julian, that it hardly necessitates any form of national government: "the functionaries at Washington to whom it is trusted require to be nothing more than men of fair abilities to discharge it to the entire satisfaction of the nation. *The machine which they direct is indeed a vast one, but so logical in its principles and direct and simple in its workings, that it all but runs itself*; and nobody but a fool could derange it" (*Looking* 106; emphasis added). In this future, even the highest government officials are functionally menial workers, bureaucratic machinists, tasked with ensuring that the parts are properly oiled. While Bellamy certainly intends to mean that it is easy to manage everything because of its precise efficiency, when one considers the extent to which Bellamy envisions his workers as servile automatons, the machine under control takes on a new, tyrannical meaning.

The extent to which workers are degraded to automata is relatively obscured in Bellamy's novels, as he rarely provides a glimpse into how workers work. Beaumont notes that the scarcity of workers depicted in a state of work is emblematic of Bellamy's fixation on consumption rather than production as the "utopian charge" of the novel (xv). As such, Beaumont concludes, "the citizens of twenty-first-century Boston are by vocation consumers rather than producers" (xvi). Edith self-identifies in *Looking Backward* as an "indefatigable shopper" before informing Julian of her profession (Bellamy, *Looking* 59). (We do not learn until *Equality* that Edith is by profession a farmer.) It is little surprise then that the few workers seen working in the novel are providing customer service to Julian and Edith on their excursion to the local "distributing establishment," which is modeled after the shopping mall.

Depicted as a grand cathedral of light and tranquility, the mall is instructive in understanding how Bellamy envisions workers, as it establishes their place in the background of

the more pertinent "work" of consumption. As Julian takes in the beauty and splendor of the mall—which boasts an airy glassed dome, a "magnificent fountain," and "frescoed" walls "in mellow tints, calculated to soften without absorbing the light which flooded the interior"—he notes a lack of clerks to assist Edith with her shopping (60). "Where is the clerk?" Julian asks. Edith explains that clerks no longer pester shoppers with pressure tactics to buy products; now that the government employs all the workers and produces all goods, clerks no longer need to make sales to make money. As a result, the workers in the department stores are phantasmic and ephemeral, attending to customers only when they are summoned by the press of a button. While this, to Julian's satisfaction, means that shoppers need no longer worry about the manipulations of a disreputable salesclerk, it also underscores the vacuousness of employment in Bellamy's utopian workscape. The lack of interpersonal relationship between the clerk and the customer, a mechanic of shopping Bellamy adopted from the burgeoning department store, means that shopper and seller alike lose out on the spontaneity of a "human encounter . . . inflected with quirks of personality and perhaps saturated with the details of past encounters" (Peyser 46). Instead, Thomas Peyser notes, shopping becomes a "stark decision by the consumer: to pay the price or not" (46). In this sterile environment, clerks no longer need to know anything about the products they sell and spend no time engaging with customers. Edith explains: "It is not necessary that [a clerk] should know or profess to know anything about [the goods on sale]. Courtesy and accuracy in taking orders are all that are required of him" (61). Thus, the position becomes one of rote actions and good manners, a passive and idle existence. It is obvious why this "fix" to the shopping experience appeals to the consumer, but for the worker this promises an insipid workday.

Considering the banality of employment in the future, it is difficult to accept Bellamy's assurances that the shift from nineteenth-century capitalism to twenty-first-century Nationalism was the willing choice of the working class. Bellamy's premise is made all the more suspicious by the fact that he allocates a surprising amount of page space to conceptualizing how to create a pliable army of workers. Beginning with reproduction, Bellamy explores the ways in which an ideal army of workers can literally be conceived. This begs the question of how free Bellamy's citizens really are to choose their vocation, and thus their life, in future Boston.

"Some One Who Works Gladly, and Plays as Gladly as He Works": Howells' Vision of Work in Altruria

Howells rejects the kind of labor authoritarianism that Bellamy envisions out of hand, instead imagining Altruria as a neoclassical democracy comprised of regional governments made up of small villages of farmers and craftspeople. After abandoning the "complicated facilities and conveniences of the capitalistic epoch," the Altrurians "have got back as close as possible to nature" (*Through* 157). While there is a national capital and government and a thriving intellectual culture, most of Altrurian life is based on the regional communalism of the village. As such, Altruria embodies the Arcadian promise of the American continent reborn. According to Steven Nash Smith, this idyllic conception of America established the continent as the "Garden of the World," an "agricultural paradise" that promised bountiful harvests and a grand expanse of fertile land to cultivate (123, 124). By the eighteenth century, Leo Marx explains in his canonical work *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964), the mythopoetic vision of America as an "agricultural paradise" became "the cardinal image of American aspirations," America as "a rural landscape, a well-ordered green garden

magnified to continental size. Although it probably shows a farmhouse or a neat white village, the scene usually is dominated by natural objects . . . This is the countryside of the old Republic, a chaste, uncomplicated land of rural virtue" (141). This is not to say that Howells' novels should be read as the kind of sentimental fiction associated with what Marx defines as literary pastoralism, a cruder "expression less of thought than of feeling" that plays upon "an inchoate longing for a more 'natural' environment" as escape from the chaos and banality of urban living (5, 10). While Howells certainly characterizes Altruria as an agrarian paradise in contradistinction from industrializing America—these are *utopian* novels after all—he does so not to simply manifest a "[vehicle] of escape from reality" (Marx 10), but to conceptualize an organizational principle: a means of schematizing his utopian society to excise work from its capitalist connotations and in the process generate a political pastoral in which the agrarian philosophy is functionally a means of organizing society into a cohesive whole and delimiting its time spent at work.

In particular, it seems that Altruria follows a Jeffersonian conception of agrarian pastoralism as set down in Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia* (1785). Like Jefferson, Howells is not concerned with agrarianism as a symbol of hard work, industriousness, or individualism; quite the opposite, Howells deploys ruralism as a curative for the corruptive influences of efficiency, industry, and profitability. Leo Marx explains, in his reading of *Notes*, that Jefferson's devotion to agriculture stemmed from his belief that agriculture ensured the preservation of "rural manners, that is, 'rural virtue'" (126). As an extended passage from Jefferson's *Notes* quoted in Marx's book shows, Jefferson, like Howells, saw in agrarianism the American ideal of leisure, not productivity:

> While we have land to labour then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a workbench, or twirling a distaff. . . . let our work-shops remain in Europe. It is better to carry provisions and materials to workmen there, than bring them to the provisions and materials, and with them their manners and principles. The loss by the transportation of commodities across the Atlantic will be made up in happiness and permanence of government. (qtd. in Marx 125)

A great deal of Jefferson's sentiment is expressed in Homos' description of the labor system in Altruria. After realizing that "one hour sufficed where twelve hours were needed before" to produce the necessary commodities for Altrurian society, workers "no longer wore themselves out over their machines" and "were released to the happy labor of the field, where no one with us toils killingly, from dawn till dusk" (*Traveler* 276). Rather, a worker "does only as much work as is needed to keep the body in health," which is later defined as four hours obligatory work at a craft skill and in field work (276). This conception of work echoes Jefferson's call to abandon profitability for the sake of "happiness and permanence," and envisions a labor system where work is highly regimented to avert its creeping omnipresence. This, Benjamin Hunnicutt explains, fits into an earlier philosophy of work that envisioned human self-actualization taking place outside of employment. "Until the end of the nineteenth century," Hunnicutt tells us, "few expected that the economy might be the place where humans would realize our full potential—our full, *free* humanity was to be discovered outside the economy, beyond pecuniary concerns" (3). "Even commitment to hard work," Hunnicutt insists, "was seldom valued as an end in itself"; Rather, "devotion to work was virtuous because it was a means to other, higher cultural and spiritual ends" (3). In this sense, and in opposition to Bellamy, abundance is understood as a state of equilibrium in which necessary material, physical, and spiritual needs are met, and

excess time and resources directed toward the cultivation of the individual outside the workspace. While Bellamy is largely concerned with the cycle of working and spending that maintains the revolving system of production and consumption, a system that compels citizens to work for the sake of working, and for the sake of buying, much like in capitalism, Howells recognizes work as a necessary but subordinate—and necessarily minor—function of life.

With such lofty goals in mind, it is fair to question Howells' reticence to include labor- and time-saving machines in the scheme of his utopia. Although Altruria retains some of the "labor-saving inventions which the Accumulation perverted to money-making," it has eradicated steam power entirely—replaced by a fully electric infrastructure—and largely scaled back mechanization in industry and farming (*Traveler* 292). If Howells aims to reduce the amount of time workers need to work, why would he restrict the technology that could release workers from long hours of physical toil? Undeniably, Howells' refusal to expand mechanization as the pathway to total labor automation follows from a moral aversion to idleness. In *Through the Eye of the Needle*, Homos' wife Evelith writes to a friend in America that "as *work* is the ideal, [the Altrurians] do not believe in what we call labor-saving devices" (158). But that, as I will show, is a deceptively simple interpretation of Howells' intentions. The abolition of most technology in Altruria also stems from a belief that mechanization ensures the perpetuation of an intellectually stunted, submissive, and pliant working-class substratum. This dystopian vision of mechanization run amok represents an intentional break with Bellamy, evidenced by Howells' aversion to Bellamy's technocratic idealism, which he directly critiques in an 1898 *Atlantic* article:

> I should have preferred . . . the millennium much simpler, much more independent of modern inventions, modern conveniences, modern facilities. It seemed to me that in an

> ideal condition (the only condition finally worth having) we should get on without most of these things, *which are but sorry patches on the rags of an outworn civilization, or only toys to amuse our greed and vacancy*. (Howells, "Edward" 254; emphasis added).

For Howells, mechanization and oppression are inextricably linked. Late in *Traveler*, during Homos' lecture to an audience of predominantly working-class listeners on the evolution of Altruria, he explains that Altrurians, in passing through their phase of free-market prosperity (The Accumulation), realized that machines and mechanization constituted a regressive and alienating agent within their social development that devoured their bodies and stunted their intellect. Homos laments that in the "delirium of hope" brought about by the adoption of free-market capitalism and mass industry, Altrurians ignored the ways mechanization "alienate[d] us from one another," "devoured women and children, and wasted men at the bidding of the power [The Accumulation] which no man must touch" (259, 260). Homos characterizes the age of industrial capitalism in Altruria as one in which the proliferation of mechanization disrupted the natural order, anthropomorphizing machines into creatures and workers into "a hapless race of men who bred their kind for [the machines'] service" (261).

In characterizing mechanization's effect on humans in this way, Howells articulates an issue with so-called labor-saving technology that even in the twenty-first century we have yet to truly grapple with: the fact that technology does not substantively reduce the amount of work one is expected to complete. It is for this reason that Howells calls mechanical innovations the "sorry patches on the rags of an outworn civilization," as they do little to actually modernize the Altrurians' relationship to work. Rather, as Howells' depiction of technology's effects on humans suggests, it only functions to ensure the worker sacrifices his or her entire life—through time spent working and consuming—in service to the machine. In *Traveler*, this paradox

between mechanization and work is captured in the Saturday night shoe, a cheap imitation dress shoe that quickly wore out and required frequent (weekly) purchase. Because these shoes rapidly deteriorate, they require constant production, which necessitates constant employment, and thus perpetuate a labor system of drudge work that exploits workers for low pay and produces poor products. The "sham shoes," as Homos defines them, representing "half our industries and . . . half the work that was done," creates an unbroken loop of production and consumption that ensures social stagnation and wage slavery (275). These shoes also demonstrate the false, "sham," demand for work that perpetuates the philosophy of full-time employment, the same philosophy that undergirds Bellamy's utopia. This is getting to the point and problem of technological advancement and work science: The drive to optimize does not actually lead to less work; rather, it results in exponential strain as the human body attempts to keep up with efficiency measures or slump under the malaise of idle mechanization. As the industrial revolution, and its subsequent advancements, prove, developments in machine processes and mass production did little to actually free people from work. Alternately, the Altrurians recognize the importance of work temperance. By working only toward what is needed, there will always be enough work for another day. In a peculiar way, this preservation of work in perpetuity ensures that Altrurians are no longer slaves to it. Once the Altrurians recognize that the production of these types of products constituted the bulk of their work time, they set out to reform work to ensure that their time was no longer wasted.[21]

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[21] It is worth noting that the Saturday night shoe represents a direct, though unintended, critique of Bellamy's labor system and material culture as characterized in *Equality* (1897). The short-term apparel of Altruria's past becomes the bedrock of consumerism in Bellamy's future through the production of paper clothing that wearers dispose of once the clothes become "so much soiled as to need washing" (*Equality* 49). As a utopian fantasticality, these paper clothes are intended to represent a dissolution of the laborious tending to and mending of clothes that took up a great deal of domestic work, but as a means of reducing workload, they serve to ensure a perpetual need for raw material harvesting, material production, garbage collection, and recycling.

The Altrurian solution to this cycle of unending labor is to invest in craft goods that last longer and thus require less production. By making "honest shoes," Homos explains in his lecture on Altruria in *Traveler*, "which lasted a year" but "took no more time to make" than a pair of sham shoes "that lasted a week," "the amount of labor in shoemaking was at once enormously reduced" (275). This approach to production, which defines the entirety of Altrurian manufacturing, means that work hours are shortened to four hours of mandatory work time that the Altrurians define as "the Obligatories" (295). These set working hours guarantee access to all the material goods a worker may need. There is no form of currency or credit in Altruria; workers "get everything [they] want, within reason, and certainly everything [they] need, for nothing. You have only to provide yourself with a card . . . when you first go to buy there, which certifies that you belong to this or that working-phalanx and that you have not failed in the Obligatories for such and such a length of time" (*Through* 180-81). Additionally, beyond manufacturing goods, the philosophy of necessary work defines the entire ethos of labor in Altruria, a cultural move that fundamentally reimagines work as a finite process of exertion. Without the greed and avarice that promulgates economic competition, projects intended to "make work" were abandoned: "The [railroads] that had been built to invest capital, or parallel other roads, or 'make work,' as it was called, or to develop resources, or boom localities, were suffered to fall into ruin. . . . The ugly towns that they had forced into being, as Frankenstein was fashioned, from the materials of the charnel, and that had no life in or from the good of the community, soon tumbled into decay" (280). Such revelations inspire an entirely new conception of time and work that is fundamentally antithetical to the capitalist doctrine of chronometry, industry, and efficiency. "As soon as we were freed from the necessity of preying upon one another, we found that *there was no hurry*. The good work would wait to be well done"

(*Traveler* 279). This is perhaps the greatest hurdle for newcomers to Altruria, who must consciously unlearn the work habits of American capitalism when they arrive on the continent. In one of the few dramatic episodes to punctuate *Through the Eye of the Needle*, a wealthy American family, the Thralls, are shipwrecked on the island and must assimilate to Altrurian culture. While the initial tension between the Thralls and the Altrurians rests on Mr. and Mrs. Thrall's refusal to participate in the Obligatories—they are a wealthy family well stocked with a surplus of provisions upon arrival—once they do, the problem of Mr. Thralls ambitions becomes a new and more challenging problem to overcome. Mr. Thrall "could not be persuaded to take five minutes for rest out of every twenty, and he could not get over his life-long habit of working *against* time" (212). It is some time before Thrall recognizes that in Altruria one works "*with* [time], so as to have enough work to do each day" (212). By working with time, the Altrurians mean to live and work by their own pace rather than by the pace of profitability. Without the dollar sign to chase, productivity accounts for the quality and satisfaction of work.

In the eyes of the Altrurians, the capitalist drive for efficiency only produces a rapid circuity that produces little substantive change in society. This is expressed by Evelith's analysis of Altrurian newspapers, which occasionally include pieces on "capitalistic history, from earliest to the latest times" (*Through* 219). These reports chronicle the sluggish social progress in capitalist countries. Bringing to light the lethargic development of "capitalistic history," Howells mocks capitalism as an efficient means of getting nowhere fast. In contrast, Altruria represents an evolutionarily hyperspace in which progress, unburdened by selfishness, develops steadily onward. Importantly, Evelith denotes that life in Altruria "is so subjective . . . that there is usually nothing like news in it" (*Through* 128). The Altrurian investment in the subjective—the individual—stands in direct contrast to Bellamy's rigidly ordered world where objectivity is

emphasized throughout, especially as a way of regimenting social order and work. As Peyser contends, "Howells is not eager to base his vision of a global order on an eternally fixed set of beliefs about just what a human being is and just how such a creature should spend his or her life (117). Howells draws our attention to the paradox of Bellamy's conception of work by pointing out the irony of the American mythos of individualism, which is so often undercut by the anonymization of modern industrial labor. Homos sees little individuality in the present treatment of the American worker:

> Individuality! I find no record of it here, unless it is the individuality of the few. That of the many makes no sign from the oblivion in which it is lost, either in these public works of artistic cooperation, or the exhibits of your monopolistic competition. I have wandered through these vast edifices and looked for the names of the men who wrought the marvels of ingenuity that fill them. But I have not often found the name even of a man who owns them. I have found the styles of the firms, the companies, the trusts which turn them out as impersonally as if no heart had ever ached or glowed in imagining and embodying them. (*Letters* 27)

In Altruria, "every man who drove a nail, or stretched a line, or laid a trowel . . . would have had his name somehow inscribed upon [the building], where he could find it, and point it out to those dear to him and proud of him" (27). While the banker that accompanies Homos on his walk through the White City believes that the workers should be satisfied to "find *their* names on the pay-rolls, where I've no doubt, they preferred to have them," Homos sees the fatal flaw in disregarding a workers' contributions: "This whole mighty industrial display," Homos decries, "is in so far dehumanized; and yet you talk of individuality as one of your animating principles" (27). The incongruencies that Homos points up between American ideals of individuality and

industriousness and the mundane reality of the public erasure of American workers' contributions to the development of the country highlight the hypocrisy of the conviction that citizens should hold their employment in highest regard. If one is to seriously consider finding selfhood in work, Altrurians' maximalist egalitarian approach is a fundamental necessity. How else, as Homos points out, can a society value its workers than by recognizing their individual contributions, no matter how small?

The Altrurian solution to this problem is to embrace the worker as an artist in their own right. In Altruria, work becomes an act of artfulness, a process of creation that is invested in beauty rather than productivity. The "spirit of the artist" replaces the spirit of industry, and with this shift in the spiritual nature of work comes a renewed investment in its pleasure (*Traveler* 279). As Evelith recounts in her letters back to America, the Altrurians' celebration of the artistic spirit derives from its duality: "some one who works gladly, and plays as gladly as he works" (*Through* 172). Understandably, the proposition that work can be pleasurable should be met with some skepticism, as it evokes the half-hearted aphorism, "do what you love and you won't work a day in your life." But, in Altruria this seems to be a fundamental reconstitution of the work ethos. Altruria inverts labor scarcity as we know it not to terrorize workers into over-exerting themselves in an effort to demonstrate their use value, but to encourage leisurely industry as a method of extending the finite work available, and as a result downplays work's importance. In this sense, the Obligatories, while seemingly in line with Bellamy's highly regimented work culture, actually function as a delimiter that celebrates labor abstention as Altruria's fundamental labor philosophy. This reconceptualization of work also means that a person's free time, called the Voluntaries, is liberally understood to represent a true ownership of one's life. While most Altrurians adopt some kind of craft hobby to occupy their Voluntaries or use the Voluntaries to

study or conduct experiments in one of the regional capitals, Homos and Evelith are insistent upon the permissibility of complete labor abstention during these off hours. "In a country like this," Evelith notes, "where everybody works, nobody *over* works, and that when the few hours of obligatory labor are passed in the mornings, people need not do anything unless they choose" (*Through* 170). Because all reproductive work—the unpaid responsibilities associated with childrearing and housework—is shared communally, work does not intrude upon the Voluntaries as it does now.

With time unbound from the obligations of life, there is temporal space to cultivate one's personality outside the realm of work. Whereas Bellamy shifts this self-actualizing potential to the shopping mall and the purchasing of consumer goods—a choice that emphasizes the pious isolation of communion with the ritual shopping space that shuns even the simple exchange of consumer pleasantries—Howells, in keeping with the artistic mode of expression, presents conversation as the key to shared enlightenment. A centerpiece of this philosophy is the midday meal, which Howells presents as a communal gathering for the exchange of ideas. "Most of the discussions and debates take place at our midday meal," Homos explains to the crowd at the end of *Traveler*, "which falls at the end of the obligatory labors, and is prolonged indefinitely, or as long as people like to chat and joke, or listen to the reading of some pleasant book" (295). While there are no limits on what can be discussed during these meetings, Homos emphasizes in his description argumentation "on questions of aesthetics and metaphysics" (294). Thus, the communicative atmosphere of Altruria becomes, as Peyser defines it, a "dream world where free communication is the order of the day. There, if anywhere, one would be free to spin out the representation of oneself most according with human happiness; it would seem the ideal playground of self-creation, the place one would be most able to escape the constraining

identities sanctioned by a corrupt society" (120-21). No longer codified by one's career or one's purchases, the self is free to manifest as it sees fit through the intellectual expression of the individual. This is perhaps as close as one may come to being free, at least intellectually, from the confines of work, as all discourse on personhood would be free from the muddling concerns of funding one's existence, saving for the future, or seeking more lucrative employment that often undermine the hopefulness and imaginativeness of much post-work thinking. In Altruria, one's self-creation is intimately entwined with one's desires, a luxury that cannot be bought in Bellamy's labor authoritarianism.

Conclusion

However, as one might imagine, realizing a dream is often a disheartening effort, as the beauty and power of a dream resides in its incorporeality, its evanescence. This seems to be the case for Altruria, as even Howells recognized the frailty of his utopian logic. Writing to Charles Eliot Norton after the publication of *Through the Eye of the Needle*, he concedes, "All other dreamers of such dreams have had nothing but pleasure in them; I have had touches of nightmare" (qtd in Peyser 128). Such pessimism, Peyser figures, derives from Howells' recognition that "any community, even one designed to maximize a multiplicity of perspectives, is bound to depend on the at least occasional coercion of the individual, even if the individuals so coerced do not find their identities liquidated in the manner preferred by Bellamy" (128). Ultimately, Altrurian society is one in which work reigns supreme, and the ethics of workism remain staunchly in place. This is captured most clearly in the Altrurian opinion of anti-labor behavior, which is treated in the same manner as the so-called criminal class, or lumpenproletariat. Evelith warns that individuals who take issue with every kind of work are

subject to authoritative reprimand and put to work doing something they “had *better* like,” or they will be left to starve (*Through* 172). Similarly, when a group of shipwrecked sailors are caught stealing from Altrurian farms, they are sentenced to labor wearing “a kind of shirt of mail . . . which could easily be electrized by a metallic filament connecting with the communal dynamo” (197). Such authoritarian practices are shared with Bellamy. Thus, Howells’ utopia cannot dodge the troubling subsumption of the individual into the “undifferentiated mass” (Peyser 129).

Similarly, Matthew Beaumont, in his introduction to *Looking Backward*, concludes by recognizing that “so many of the social dreams of the late nineteenth century subsequently darkened into nightmares” as they were realized in the twentieth century (xxx). The great fantasia of nineteenth-century utopian labor, which is largely associated with Bellamy’s novel and his vision of an “industrial army,” became a grim vision of automatism as the industrial practices of Frederic Taylor’s scientific management and Henry Ford’s assembly line reduced workers to cogs in the grand machines of mass labor. Bellamy, through his embrace of Spencerian evolutionary logic, finds industrial salvation in the promise of exponential refinement of what he calls the “social organism” (*Equality* 88). Imagining efficiency in mechanical terms—“production is geared to demand like an engine to the governor which regulates its speed”—Bellamy envisions his workers as nearly indistinguishable from the machines that they operate, a “mechanical force resulting from the perfect interworking with the rest of every wheel and every hand” (*Looking* 140, 142). To Bellamy, whose concern is entirely with the practical efficiency of his system, humanity becomes an aberration that must be conditioned out of workers to ensure maximum productivity within the singular national machine. If workers in the nineteenth century were slave to the oppressive wheels of the “prodigious coach” of capitalism, then Bellamy’s

workers are slave to the cogwheels of machine efficiency. These utopias articulate, in optimistic terms, the dystopian future of the twentieth century. By presenting a world of mass labor as a vision of future perfection, the socialist utopias reinforced capitalist ideals of labor conformity.

Chapter Two: "It Takes a Man to Work in Hell": Expressionist Theater and The Self-Destructive Paradox of White Working-Class Masculinity

"According to the historiography of masculinity, white working-class manhood has been 'under siege' since the founding of the republic"

Ava Baron (146)

In presenting the world of mass labor as a vision of future perfection, the utopians of the nineteenth century reinscribed capitalist ideals of productivism as a liberatory ethos of self-actualization. Edward Bellamy in particular casts a long shadow over the coming century, as his utopian vision of a subordinate worker army guided by technocratic leaders and aided by scientifically tuned machines posited a future in which mass industry would make the daily drudgery of work a pleasurable, or at least purposeful experience. As Bellamy fantasizes in *Equality*, his 1897 follow-up to his hugely popular *Looking Backward* (1888), "as we have grown stronger, all sorts of work have grown lighter. Almost no heavy work is done directly now; machines do all, and we only need to guide them, and the lighter the hand that guides, the better the work done" (44). Bellamy deserves recognition for his luminous imagination, for his conception of America's industrial future is remarkably accurate; however, advancements in mass industry, which were originally greeted as "potentially liberating, freeing workers from mechanical drudgery," ultimately "worked in the opposite direction, to make most work increasingly mechanical" (Rodgers 66). Daniel Rodgers attests that "the economics of manufacturing focused invention not on the dullest or even the most machinelike jobs in a factory but on the most intricate and most expensive," creating a rigid hierarchy of labor that established a cadre "of highly skilled and highly paid" experts at the top and a phalanx of "cheaply recruited and quickly trained operatives" at the bottom (66). Bellamy's utopian dream

of a national worker army was realized by the twentieth century's nightmarish refinement of mechanical and managerial innovations.

Unsurprisingly, the massification of work brought with it a profound rupture in workers' conceptualization of their existential and social purpose, as traditional expectations about work's role in achieving self-actualization clashed with the impersonality of mass labor. Randolph Bourne, writing for *The Atlantic* in 1914, confronts this rupture between expectations and reality in a piece titled "In the Mind of the Worker." In it, he lays bare the cruel irony of mass labor: "The worker has been made a mere cog in a big machine, and yet he is constantly reproached for being without initiative." As developments in industrial mechanization either trivialized, through the subdivision of labor, or outright eliminated jobs that provided workers a sense of individuality and autonomy, work came to be understood as a benumbing and stultifying episode in the lives of workers.

There is, perhaps, no better evidence of the cultural impact of mechanization and mass labor on the American consciousness than the emergence of expressionist theater in the United States in the early twentieth century. Inspired by the Avant Garde stylistics of German expressionism and heir to the social consciousness of the social problem play, American dramatic expressionism combines highly stylized sets and performances with innovative special effects to stage the tension between an oppressive and unfeeling mechanical world and an individual either fighting against or succumbing to the monotonous drudgery of modern American life. Unique to expressionism as compared to early social plays is its interest in the interplay between the external and internal worlds of its characters. Where early social drama "represents the impact of social forces on the lives of individuals" unidirectionally, "as a movement from the outside in, expressionism represents both outside forces pressing in and

internal forces pressing back out onto the environment (Walker, "Naturalism" 271). This is achieved through performative flourishes—including an emphasis on repetitive movements, clipped dialogue, and flat characters—that stylize the effects of mechanization and labor optimization practices, and the use of the mise-en-scène as a means of symbolizing the abstract "spiritual, emotional, or psychological state of its central character" (271). These aesthetic flourishes modernize expressionism's social commentary by complicating the relationship between the individual and his or her society. As Julia Walker explains:

> Expressionism invites its audience to consider the larger social forces pressing in on the modern subject. But, by pressing the spiritual, emotional, or psychological state of that modern subject back onto the mise-en-scène, it complicates the analytical perspective of the scientist regarding a "slice of life" under a slide glass by inviting the audience to vicariously experience the character's proprioception of his or her world (276).

This proves an especially compelling feature of expressionist theater, as it offers its audience the opportunity to consider how one is both shaped by, and shapes, their world. As such, I see expressionism as an important movement through which to investigate mass labor's effect on workers' perception of themselves and their work in the early twentieth century. As a new iteration of the progressive melodramas and commercial theater of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which often prized work as a moral tonic, Expressionism challenges narratives of work as a viable pathway to self-actualization by calling attention to the incompatibility between mass labor and worker humanity.

In this chapter, I will analyze two of the most well-known American expressionist plays from the 1920s, Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922) and Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923), to demonstrate how expressionist theater stages the existential anxieties of mass labor

and its resulting worker automatism.[22] Robert "Yank" Smith in O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* captures the frustration and anger of the disenfranchised and hyper-masculine industrial worker within the mechanized workspace, envisioned in O'Neill's play as the "*cramped . . . bowels*" of a steamship (121). Slave to the insatiable appetite of the ship's engines and the regulatory control of the ship's engineers, Yank is nonetheless a proud and hyper-masculine character who sees his work as a vital point of pride. This duality in Yank makes him an exemplar of the complexity of the automata worker, simultaneously subjugated to the technocratic order of the stokehole and desirous of a selfhood beyond the work that has turned him into a human machine.

In contrast, Mr. Zero in Rice's *The Adding Machine*, embodies the emasculated white-collar worker of the barren officescape, a "*thin, sallow, undersized, and partially bald*" career accountant left spiritually malnourished by his repetitive and menial work in a department store (67). Zero is stuck in a no-man's land of bureaucratic anonymity, a prisoner of his own capitalist convictions, encased in what Max Weber defines as "a shell as hard as steel" (121). Like Yank, who believes that his unwavering commitment to work defines him as a superior man, Zero holds firm to the belief that his allegiance to the capitalist system assures his corporate and masculine greatness, and fails to understand that his commitment to outmoded precepts of white-collar achievement dooms him to become a vestigial piece of the evermore mechanized leviathan.

The Hairy Ape and *The Adding Machine*'s fundamental concern with the spiritual harmony of their protagonists—a concern, it must be noted, that does not inherently espouse benevolent or progressive calls for change—makes them potent works through which to articulate the tension felt between cultural beliefs in work as a means of defining selfhood and

[22] The section of this chapter on Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* will be published in the January 2024 issue of *Modernism/modernity*.

the extent to which mechanization and optimization were felt to be conditioning workers to be anonymous and alienated automatons. This emphasis on the spiritual wholeness of the protagonist, captured through expressionist theater's stylized projection of the inner self on the outer world of the stage, makes for a provocative visual and performative representation of the characters' complicated and often paradoxical desire to simultaneously reclaim control of their mechanical environment and break free from it. Importantly, this desire, irreconcilable in the plays, results in the death of the protagonists, highlighting the existential threat of capitalist convictions to work oneself into being. Rather, as these plays suggest, modern capitalism represents an efficient system in which to work oneself to death.

Furthermore, Expressionism's interplay between the inner and outer world complicates our understanding of the relationship between worker and their environment. What is often not considered when examining *The Hairy Ape* or *The Adding Machine* is the complicity of the central characters in their own oppression and regression. Both Yank and Zero, through their unflappable allegiance to their labor, ensure that meaningful change cannot be achieved. This is directly tied to the expressionist mode through which their stories are presented. The complex push and pull between the internalization of outer forces and outward projection of inner desires opens opportunities to discuss the messy relationship between structural oppression and individual acquiescence to such systems. Without disregarding the plays' recognition that workers possess limited means of opposing the abstract systems and monolithic corporations that oppress them, this chapter offers a space in which to question the characters' disinterest in overturning such systems. In the expressionist drama of O'Neill and Rice, the problem of worker self-actualization proves the result of both the systemic violence that emerges in the form of

mechanical innovations and the self-inflicted violence of the workers' unwavering faith in their work to achieve autonomy.

I do this by examining the understudied racial and gendered themes of the plays, which correlate Yank and Zero's enthusiasm for and anxieties toward their work with the increase in both women and non-white workers in traditionally homogenous workspaces. White men were especially sensitive to the changes occurring at the turn of the century for reasons unsurprising and eternal: The simplification of work and the increase in non-white and female workers in the labor pool dispelled the ethos of white (Anglo-American) male supremacy. This results in the construction of an invasion narrative that puts the blame on immigrants, African Americans, and women for the dwindling power of white male laborers.[23] Channeling this anxiety through the medium of expressionist theater counters such arguments by representing these anxieties as self-inflicted (outward projections of internal feelings) harm by white male laborers on themselves. While the desire to justify losses in labor autonomy is to implicate foreign invaders, the reality is that these changes have been the result of white capitalist moves to accrue more wealth while disenfranchising the American worker.

Working-Class Masculinity and the Twentieth-Century Man

Much like the stokehole in which O'Neill sets the first half of *The Hairy Ape*, early twentieth-century labor discourse was complex, divergent, and volatile. As much a period of left-

[23] In the years following World War I, Lothrop Stoddard peddled apocalyptic visions of white America's demise in his 1920 book, *The Rising Tide of Color: Against White World-Supremacy*. In it, Stoddard warns that if "the white world continues to rend itself with internecine wars," it will be overrun by "colored armies . . . which would swamp whole populations and turn countries now white into *colored man's lands* irretrievably lost to the white world" (vi; emphasis added). The book was well received by mainstream newspapers, like *The New York Times*, and cited by President Warren Harding as justification for ongoing government policies of segregation of Black and non-white Americans. For more on race anxieties in inter-war America, see Paul Lawrie's *Forging a Laboring Race: The African American Worker in the Progressive Imagination* (2016).

wing, union-centric progressivism as it was of right-wing populism, it is challenging to codify a singular vision that best represents the attitude of working-class men toward their labor. I, by no means, intend to attempt it in this dissertation. However, it is fair to say that these early decades of the twentieth century found men wrestling with a nostalgia for the nineteenth century and the belief that the preceding century was an idyllic one for working-class men. These competing perspectives on work and the working-class man are imagined in O'Neill's play by Long, Yank, and Paddy, disparate voices attempting to rationalize the shifting conceptions of working-class masculinity at the turn of the century. As rapid developments in mechanization and a renewed interest in scientific management furthered the nineteenth century's systematic obsolescence of many jobs that awarded men a sense of individuality and autonomy, white masculinity was felt to be in crisis.[24] I use *felt* here in line with Ava Baron's commentary on the omnipresence of white male anxiety, as throughout these transitional periods, white working-class men are never actually in a state of endangerment or crisis; rather, the phrase typically defines an anxiety concerning new cultural developments (e.g. the growing presence of women in the workplace, changing labor markets, and rising numbers of African American and immigrant labor) within traditionally homogenous white male working-class communities that elicits a shift in their own self-actualization. "According to the historiography of masculinity," Baron explains, "white working-class manhood has been 'under siege' since the founding of the republic" (146).[25] At the turn of the century, mass production grew, atomizing the complexities of production into menial and repetitive tasks that emasculated working-class men desirous of the masculinizing

[24] See Robyn Muncy's "Trustbusting and White Manhood in America, 1898-1914" (1997), for an extensive analysis of white working-class men's fears of corporate capitalism.
[25] For additional information on the perceived crisis in masculinity during the twentieth century, see Milette Shamir and Jennifer Travis' *Boys Don't Cry?: Rethinking Narratives of Masculinity and Emotion in the U.S* (2002) and Allan Johnson's *Masculine Identity in Modernist Literature: Castration, Narration, and a Sense of the Beginning, 1919-1945* (2017).

status of a craftsman or professional (Muncy 23). Paddy, the elder stoker of O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, expresses such a longing for an idyllic past during his lament for "the fine days" of his youth when "we was free men," (O'Neill, *Hairy Ape* 126), working in harmony with the sea on sailing ships that allowed men to express their "skill and daring" *and* enjoy their private leisure during off hours (127). Long, the radical cipher of the play, uses Paddy's recollection as a call to arms while Yank refuses such wistfulness out of hand as a marker of Paddy's labor obsolescence.

This shift in the male laborer's relationship to his work and his sense of manhood is in no small part the result of a confluence of mechanical innovations and cultural shifts in the early twentieth century: Frederick Winslow Taylor's scientific management and its application in Henry Ford's assembly line system, along with the Great Migration of African American Southern laborers to the North and an influx of European migrants—prior to World War I—to the United States. Taylor's near-fanatical drive to fine tune both machines and men to achieve maximum efficiency resulted in the systematizing of human labor through the sub-dividing of labor tasks, the scrutiny of labor efficiency, and the creation of the efficiency manager to measure and enforce productivity quotas. Ford's embrace of motion analysis and stopwatch management were heralded as boons to efficiency and worker happiness since they ensured higher levels of productivity without the stress of thinking about complicated labor processes.[26]

The reality of applying scientific management and assembly line systems to human laborers proved otherwise. The division of labor meant that workers rarely achieved the sense of self-satisfaction associated with completing a job, and professional advancement disappeared as

[26] Henry Ford explains, in his book of business philosophy by way of autobiography, *My Life and Work* (1923), that while some men, himself included, desire work that necessitates both "mind as well as muscle," the average worker "wants a job in which he does not have to think." Ford goes so far as to assert that "in fact, to some types of mind thought is absolutely appalling" (103).

labor deskilling closed off avenues to promotion. This not only alienated the worker from their work—abstracting production into a series of rote movements—but also ensured cheaper and more dependent workers. As Steven Maynard highlights, the power of professionalization "was by the twentieth century turned against" workers to delegitimize their work and their demands for respect and remuneration (162). It became harder to make demands on one's employer when an employee was understood to be an interchangeable cog in the machine. Additionally, as Sigfried Giedion explains, Taylor, in his attempt to find the limits of human productivity, ignored the fact that "the human organism is more complex than the steam hammer" (Giedion 98). In fact, Taylor was reticent to concede any complexity or intelligence to workers, often characterizing them as inferior to "an intelligent gorilla" (40). In an excoriating passage from Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management* (1915), he explains to his reader that most workers are "so stupid" that they are "unfitted to do most kinds of laboring work" (62). It seems, inversely, that the stupidity that Taylor levels at workers was *a result of*, rather than a justification for, scientific management. This is captured in Elmer Rice's firsthand account of a man working in "the canning section" of a factory governed by Taylor's logic: "a young man sat beside a vat through which sealed cans of beef stew moved on a belt. Open-eyed and open-mouthed, he watched for air bubbles, snatching out the imperfectly sealed cans, a horrible picture of imbecility. I felt strongly about the stultifying effects of industrialism; that moronic boy personified for me the evils of the machine age" (*Minority Report* 127).

Feelings of degeneration and lost individuality were made more acute by the increased diversity of the workplace as more European immigrants and African American transplants moved into labor domains previously exclusive to white—as defined by their Anglo-American nationality—working-class men. Rice alludes to the animosity against "non-white" workers at

the time during a dinner party scene in *The Adding Machine* where Zero's assorted friends, the indistinguishable Misters and Misses One through Six call for an "America for the Americans" (80). While brief, the scene acknowledges the underlying prejudices that existed in labor discourse during the period. With the rise in deskilled labor, employers began hiring greater numbers of immigrant and African American workers at cheaper wages. Between 1906 and 1911, over six million immigrant workers arrived in the country and by the beginning of 1910, immigrants made up half of industrial labor in the United States while only constituting 14 percent of the population (Hapke 117). Simultaneously, the Great Migration saw over one million African Americans migrate from agriculture work in the rural South to industrial labor in both Southern cities and the North, with an initial surge between 1916 and 1918 of more than 400,000 Black workers to fulfill wartime production and the potential need for replacement workers (Marks 1; Hapke 197). However, while African American and immigrant workers generally saw their lives improved by industrial employment, they were far from treated equally. In addition to racist antagonism from their fellow white workers, and subject to worse pay and work conditions, they were equal victims to the dehumanizing manipulations of corporations who saw them as effective tools in stamping out white worker unrest in response to unfair work conditions (168).

Such shifts in the cultural makeup of the workplace necessitated a new articulation of "true" masculinity, leading to a resurgence in Social Darwinism and eugenics as a means of racially codifying masculinity as white. This new measure of masculinity stressed the importance of virile, aggressive, and instinctual masculine power as a means of overcoming the unending battle between men in the capitalist market, which allowed white laborers to disguise their racial privilege as a superior physical prowess. These white supremacist ideologies—continuations of

turn-of-the-century anti-Asian labor propaganda meant to privilege "American manhood against Asiatic Coolieism"—established pseudo-scientific parameters within which "white" working-class men could create exclusivity and retain a feeling of distinct superiority and identity (Lye 55-57; Kimmel 77). Survival-of-the-fittest logic, made popular by William Graham Sumner and Lothrop Stoddard among numerous others, pervaded the discourse of labor and identity as working-class masculinity now became a question of determining who was the most *exceptional* at performing these largely rudimentary tasks, a question that was often answered through very tangible measurements of strength and physical prowess.

No longer masters of their own narratives and unable to claim an independent enterprise or craft as a marker of their masculine autonomy, white working-class men shifted their masculine coda to align with the hardships and demands of their labor as a new means of defining their masculine identity. As a result, white working-class men reasserted their masculinity through physical acts of masculine prowess that employed "strength as a substitute for control of their work and power at the workplace" (Baron 147). Industrial workers demonstrated the power of their bodies through feats of daring in their labor that put their life and limb at risk and reclaimed a sense of self-determinism and ownership that reasserts the perceived loss in autonomy inherent in laboring for the profit of a corporate boss. For white-collar workers unable to exercise their muscular masculinity in their office labor, out-of-office actions served to supplement the emasculation felt in the workplace. As Baron notes, "Suffering from anxiety resulting from 'overcivilization' and threatened with 'neurasthenia,' an occupational health hazard believed to be related to sedentary jobs, white-collar men became obsessed with ways to compensate for their emasculation . . . that emphasized muscularity and

toughness outside of the workplace" (147).[27] One finds this trope across American modernist literature of the time, from Hemingway's Jake Barnes to Sinclair Lewis' George Babbitt. *Babbitt* (1922), published the same year as O'Neill's *Hairy Ape*, captures this insecurity astutely in Babbitt's ever-nagging desire to abscond to the woods where he could live like a man, and his propensity to reimagine his upper middle-class lifestyle as a brusque working-class ruggedness, equating his office to a "pirate ship" and idolizing "bigness in anything," including "mountains, jewels, muscles, wealth, [and] words" (Lewis 23, 29). As Mary Stergiou-Kita et al. explains, "doing dangerous works is frequently equated to doing gender" (216). It is no surprise then that Yank, as an exhibition of his effectiveness and belongingness as a worker and a man, takes pride in the brutal exertions of his labor.

This relationship between working-class masculinity and workplace danger pervades much of O'Neill's early plays, suggesting that O'Neill was more than passingly interested in the effects of one's work on one's sense of selfhood. In a play like *Anna Christie*, performed the same year as *Hairy Ape*, O'Neill captures the tension between manhood and dangerous labor in Matt Burke, a more grounded rendering of Yank, a rough young stoker "*in full power of his heavy-muscled, immense strength*." After being rescued by the titular Anna and her sailor father Chris Christopherson, Burke boisterously recounts his five-day stranding in an open boat at sea as "aisy for a rale man with guts to him . . . all in the day's work." The bravado and cool of the line points to the stoker's need to represent his masculinity as stoic suffering and survival, with the implicit understanding that life-threatening danger is an inherent and blasé feature of the job (61-62). Similarly, in O'Neill's 1914 one-act play "Bound East for Cardiff"—his first produced and one of the Glencairn plays—O'Neill makes a more melodramatic connection between

[27] See also James A. Robinson, "The Masculine Primitive and The Hairy Ape" (1995), 98.

masculinity and labor. The play is also the first to explicitly connect Yank to O'Neill's real-life friend, known only as Driscoll, who committed suicide while working as a stoker on a steamship. The play centers on the death of Yank, who suffers a fatal injury after falling into a hold in the ship. The play concludes with Yank and Driscoll holding a final intimate conversation before Yank succumbs to his injuries. In his final reflections on life, the proto-Yank meditates on the unsatisfying arc of his life, lamenting that the "life of a sailor ain't much to cry about leavin'—just one ship after another, hard work, small pay, and bum grub . . . travellin' all over the world and never seein' none of it" (28). O'Neill would go on to address the destructive relationship between masculinity and work in several other early plays, including *The Great God Brown* (1926) and *Dynamo* (1929), *Dynamo* being an especially interesting play in the context of *Hairy Ape*, considering its focus on the machine worship of the play's protagonist, Rueben Light, in response to an emasculating event in the play's first act. This thematic pattern points up O'Neill's fixation on what Julia Walker prescribes as "the problem of identifying so closely with one's work that one risked becoming blind to the actual conditions of one's life," which O'Neill saw at the root of Driscoll's death and the larger suffering of working-class communities (*Expressionism* 138). However, I would argue that it is in *The Hairy Ape* that O'Neill most effectively captures and expresses this paradoxical ideology that he believed lay at the heart of Driscoll's unhappiness.

"It Takes a Man to Work in Hell": *The Hairy Ape* and The Self-Destructive Paradox of White Working-Class Masculinity

In 1911, five years before Eugene O'Neill would join the ranks of the Provincetown Players and eleven years before the first performance of *The Hairy Ape*, O'Neill's friend Driscoll

attempted suicide by jumping overboard during a stint working as a stoker on a passenger liner. Fished out of the water after a passenger saw him go overboard, Driscoll would make a second attempt two voyages later while passing along Newfoundland. This second attempt would prove successful. Shaken by Driscoll's death, O'Neill brooded over what may have compelled his friend, a man O'Neill saw as the "acme of belongingness" and self-confidence, to commit suicide (Gelb 171, 165-66). While O'Neill at the time had a feeling that Driscoll's death was the result of some rupture in his sense of belonging to the world, it was not until O'Neill began work on *The Hairy Ape* that he would solidify his understanding of the feelings that compelled Driscoll to commit suicide. Although, according to O'Neill, Driscoll "was very proud of his strength" and "his capacity for grueling work," it was not enough to sustain his sense of selfhood. While Driscoll could maintain his "limited conception of the universe" within the stokehole, he was not able to accept his indistinguishable place amongst the ever-churning cogs of the industrial machine (Gelb 165-66, 488).

O'Neill channeled this anxiety into *The Hairy Ape*'s protagonist, Robert "Yank" Smith, an industrious stoker endeavoring to exact revenge on the steel heiress, Mildred Douglas, who has "*insulted*" Yank and awakened his class consciousness. Dissatisfied with his life after his encounter with Mildred and unwilling to align himself with political movements sympathetic to class equality, Yank comes to realize that for all his boasting of being the one to make the "woild" move, the reality is that he "don't belong" in it (128). *The Hairy Ape* dramatizes Yank's fall from a false sense of self-actualization after his realization that what he viewed as an act of asserting his autonomy—his unwavering devotion to his labor—was always an act of servitude to an untouchable wealthy elite, embodied in the steel heiress Mildred, the Fifth Avenue crowd who profit from his work, and the steel company that ultimately comes to define them. As Yank

elucidates at the play's conclusion: "Steel was me, and I owned de woild. Now I ain't steel, and de woild owns me" (159). Yank's haunting realization provides a vital means of understanding the relationship between a worker's conception of selfhood in relation to their work, especially during the early twentieth century burgeoning of mechanized labor. Best captured in Yank's proclamation that "it takes a man to work in hell," the play articulates how working-class pride in the hardships of one's labor has the potential to reinforce and valorize the larger systemic problems that perpetuate such dangerous and oppressive working conditions (128).

Adding to scholarship that focuses on *The Hairy Ape*'s exposition of class inequality, labor exploitation, and masculine identity, I examine the critique inherent in Yank's working-class masculinity.[28] In past readings, Yank is frequently positioned as a man *acted upon*, as scholars Maria Miliora and Patrick Chura posit. According to Miliora and Chura, Yank is a "fragile" man who suffers at the hands of Mildred, a representative of the wealthy elites, who intrudes upon and commodifies Yank and his labor in a "self-absorbed . . . slumming expedition" (Miliora 416; Chura, "Vital Contact" 530). While these critiques of Mildred and the unsympathetic capitalist system that profits from working-class communities' suffering are undoubtedly valid and concomitant with my reading of the play, I would argue that Yank also upholds and ennobles the problematic capitalist attitude toward labor that works to keep him oppressed. As Stark Young asserts in his review of the original Provincetown Players production, the tragedy of Yank stems in large part from his "great inflexible hulk of . . . body, mind and soul" toward his social position, which only permits "half admitted" acknowledgement of his own faults, "covered up with oaths" of revenge that do nothing to mend the wounds

[28] See Chura's "'Vital Contact,'" Maria T. Miliora's "A Self Psychological Study of Dehumanization in Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*" (1996), Dassia N. Posner's "America and the Individual: *The Hairy Ape* and *Machinal* at the Moscow Kamerny Theatre" (2018), Robinson, and Julia Walker's *Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre: Bodies, Voices, Words* (2005).

inflicted on his psyche (113). In this way, I examine O'Neill's characterization of Yank as a critique of the misguided and paradoxical idealization of a mechanically industrious and dehumanizing working-class masculinity that confuses rigid and inflexible subservience to an exploitative capitalist system as masculine empowerment and autonomy.

The World Outside of Work is for "Goils"

Reading Yank as a critique of working-class masculinity, I do not mean to suggest that O'Neill's play proposes that the working-class population suffers from some inherent deficiency that results in their subjugation and inferiority. On the contrary, while *The Hairy Ape* is critical of Yank, it avoids using him to make generalized assumptions about the working-class and their ability to recognize class inequality and improve their social position. Rather, O'Neill's play rejects the paternalism of Progressivist lecture theater that assumed the necessity of a middle-class intervention into working-class communities to resolve endemic problems (Brady 328). O'Neill's departure from traditional middle-class theater is likely equal parts the result of O'Neill's personal rejection of what he saw as the artificiality and hypocrisy of his middle-class upbringing and the influence of the burgeoning experimental theater of the turn of the century, such as the Paterson Strike Pageant and the influx of European Expressionism, that both brought workers on to the stage and invited them into the theater.[29] In keeping with these radical shifts in the depiction of workers, O'Neill centers the worker as the subject of interest and reimagines the would-be philanthropist (Mildred) as a corruptive interlocuter more interested in the moral self-

[29] See Walker, *Expressionism,* 123; Robinson, 95; and Chura, "'Vital Contact'" for in-depth discussion of O'Neill's middle-class upbringing. For discussions of the role of the Paterson Strike Pageant, see Amy Brady, 328; and Patrick Chura, "Ernest Poole's *The Harbor* as a Source for O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*" (2012), 30-31. According to Chura, the Paterson Pageant is widely considered to be the spark of American Drama, specifically as a catalyst for the Provincetown Players (31). For more on the effects of European Expressionism in American drama—especially related to O'Neill—see Mardi Valgemae's *Accelerated Grimace: Expressionism in the American Drama of the 1920s*, (1972).

satisfaction she will gain from the cross-cultural encounter than the hurt she may inflict on those with which she makes contact. This dramatic departure from the norms of progressive theater, according to Chura, proves O'Neill's representation of class struggle an "effective intensification" of earlier fictional representations, something equally lauded in the original reviews for the play, as it forces audiences to confront the psychological effects of social inequality from the perspective of those affected by it (Chura, "Ernest Poole's" 33).[30]

Importantly, O'Neill foregrounds the play with stage directions that articulate how the stokers' environment directly informs their behavior and understanding of self rather than any inherent deficiency. In so doing, O'Neill rejects popular, and often white-supremacist, theories of social progress that inform the aforementioned Progressive-era labor theater. As John Nickel points out, the play "intervenes in the nature vs. nurture debates" used to justify racial and class inequality through its "portrayal of the stokers to show how significant an influence the social environment, vis-à-vis heredity, can be on a person's physical characteristics" (35).[31] The opening description of the stokers characterizes them as reshaped by their work environment to better survive below deck, a visualization that both reifies the stokers lowly social position and the pervasive and malignant effect of such work on the worker, regardless of racial or ethnic background. Confined within the metal "*bowels*" of the ship like "*beasts in a cage*," the stokers are stunted by the ship's oppressive innards that "[crush] *down upon* [their] *heads*," preventing them from standing upright (121). As longtime Provincetown player and intimate O'Neill collaborator James Light outlined for H. M. Harwood—the English theater manager who staged

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[30] Alexander Woollcott, in his review of the play, relishes O'Neill's choice to force the audience to observe the stokers at length: "Squirm as you may, [O'Neill] holds you while you listen to the rumble of their discontent." Other reviews of the period, such as Gilbert Selders' "The New York Theaters" (1922), strike similar tones of admiration for O'Neill's audacity to look at the world from within the stokehole.

[31] For further discussion of O'Neill and race, see Ralph A. Ciancio's "Richard Wright, Eugene O'Neill, and the Beast in The Skull" (1993), Kurt Eisen's *The Theatre of Eugene O'Neill: American Modernism on the World Stage* (2017), and Peter J. Gillett's "O'Neill and the Racial Myths" (1972).

the 1931 London production of *The Hairy Ape*—the stoker's forecastle used in scene one "was roughly 10 x 15 and six feet high," forcing the actors to crowd together and giving the impression that they would need to stoop to avoid hitting their heads on the forecastle's ceiling. Light explains that the room was filled with "[f]ourteen characters," resulting in a cramped and volatile space, cacophonous with the boisterous cries of sailors and the disharmonious clatter of machinery (Clare 23). As a result, the firemen are depicted onstage as evolutionarily changed compared to the wealthy passengers that luxuriate on the top deck.

Isolated in the cramped steel belly of the ship, these men become stooped-over Neanderthals, built for raw, brutal action, with "*long arms of tremendous power*" and over-developed back and shoulder muscles for shoveling coal (121).[32] These physical expressions of primitivity evoke the degenerative effects of industrialization on workers, who are molded by their work environment to be physically robust and intellectually deficient. Much like the caged ape that Yank will empathize with at the play's conclusion, most of the stokers may be capable of *feeling* the physical confinement of the ship but they lack the capacity to articulate the spiritual disharmony that troubles them at their core. It is no surprise then that within their labor enclosure, they appraise Yank as the alpha and not Long, a foil to Yank who has the political acumen to unify the stokers in a fight for better working conditions.[33] This represents the cruel

[32] This was visually codified for the audience in the menacing visage of Louis Wolheim, the actor who played Yank in the 1922 production. The college-educated actor, who formally taught at Cornell Preparatory School before achieving celebrity, exuded the physical brusqueness of "a roughhousing college football player with a broken nose," a classification that fit nicely into the primitive masculine coda championed by working-class men (Addison 4-5). In later productions of the play, similar effects were achieved through make-up that gave the actors playing the stokers "ape-like" features. By "shading below cheekbones, around eyes, and on foreheads," the famous 1926 Russian Kamerny production of *The Hairy Ape*, created "fur patterns" to accentuate the animalist appearance of the actors (Posner 6).

[33] This is a central problem within working-class communities unwilling to relinquish their labor as a symbol of their selfhood. Yank's antipathy toward Long's politics feeds into working-class masculine beliefs that protest is, according to David Pugh, a sign of an "effeminate and weak-willed" man who "wished to hamper men from doing what men knew they must do" (102). For more on the tension between masculinity and protest, see Gregory Wood's "'The Paralysis of the Labor Movement': men, Masculinity, and Unions in 1920s Detroit" (2004).

irony of the play: The stokers view Yank as "*the very last word in what they are, their most highly developed individual*," a troubling ascription considering Yank's pride in his servility and emphatic desire to sublimate himself to the capitalist machine (121).

Yank invests himself entirely in the ship, especially its productive output, using this to demarcate what makes one a man. During the chorus of drunken bellows in scene one, the stokers express their fantasies of escape from their labor, lamenting the six days of hell they must endure before reaching the freedom of Southhampton and singing "*sentimental*" songs of homes (and presumably women) that they have left behind. These expressions of sensitivity and dissatisfaction incense Yank, who sets himself apart from these sailors that lack the "noive" to survive in the hostile environment of the stokehole. For Yank, his cage is his home and these desires for the outside world represent distractions from his labor and the masculinity that it affords. In this way, Yank enacts the general desire for brotherhood and fraternity amongst laborers of the early twentieth century who believed that gender exclusivity could insulate them from attacks on their masculinity. These desires, crystallized in male-centric fraternal organizations, rejected "the century's most deeply held convictions about gender, especially the belief in the spiritual role of women and men's dependence upon them" (Clawson 17). It is no surprise then that Yank takes offense at the other stokers' desires for separation from the homosociality of the stokehole. "Where d'yuh get dat tripe," Yank snarls at a sentimental stoker singing of home, "Home? Home, hell! I'll make a home for yuh! . . . Dis is home, see?" (124). For Yank, desiring something beyond one's labor threatens the limited autonomy and authority afforded him in the stokehole and speaks to a potential rift in the male unity created within the cramped bowels of the ship. By stripping himself of all other obligations and desires—family,

love, pleasure, equality—Yank hopes to safeguard himself against pernicious thoughts and actions that may compromise the security that he finds within his work.

However, it becomes clear that these moves and Yank's rhetoric do little to reclaim any lost autonomy considering his body is regulated to satisfy the needs of the capitalist machine, as evidenced by the incessant whistle that dictates his movements. As O'Neill identifies in the stage directions for the end of scene one, when the whistle sounds for the next shift, "*the men jump up mechanically, file through the door silently close upon each other's heels in what is very like a prisoners' lockstep*" (129).[34] The stokers' Pavlovian response to the whistle undermines any proclamations of autonomy. Although Yank jeers at the engineer's "crackin' [of] de whip," he nevertheless relents to their orders, forgoing an opportunity to exercise autonomy through soldiering—a deliberate slowdown in productivity—and relinquishing control of his body to the automated rhythms of efficiency management (135).[35] The stokers may deliver the coal to the engines, but it is at the behest of the engineers. This is typified by Mildred's brief but integral appearance in the play.

Introduced as the anemic heiress to the Nazareth steel company that owns the ship, Mildred embodies the apathetic downclasser with a "groping" desire "to be of some use in the world" (131). However, Mildred's languid detachment from her social work belies an insidious "predation on the lower classes" that Chura attributes to "sublimated sexual desires" (Chura, "Vital Contact" 532). This is made apparent through Mildred's sexually charged interactions

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[34] In a letter to H.M. Harwood, James Light elaborates on the complex choreography of this scene for the actors playing the stokers: "Before 8 bells sound at the end of Yank's speech . . . the crew begins to break out in the same manner as before but at the first two beats of the bell stop rigid; the bell completes its eight in silence. At what would have been the 9-10 of the bell if it had gone on they rise. At the 10-11-12 turn to the door; at the 13-14 begin their lock-step march. The scene is the hardest for the work of the chorus; the chorus has to be synchronized with Yank's speech so as to let his words through and yet keep the thing moving with terrific rapidity also the propeller noises must be plotted so that nothing is drowned and yet the full effect is gained." (Clare 24).

[35] As Stephen Meyer explains, "soldiering and output restriction—the two serious industrial sins—were a means to protest and to assert some control over unpleasant work situations." (35).

with the ship's engineers that codifies their spaces as exotic wellsprings from which she can replenish the lost vitality "*sapped*" from her "*before she was conceived*" (O'Neill, *Hairy Ape* 130). In her interactions with the engineers escorting her to the stokehole, Mildred leers at unintended innuendo and relishes the stains of labor that she may receive while slumming in the gutter "from which [her family name] sprang" (134). Far from philanthropic, Mildred's desire to be "deflowered" by her proximity to the stokers both satisfies a repressed sexual energy and reproduces the capitalist profiteering of her forefathers by commodifying the workers as objects for her consumption. Like her grandfather and father, who melted steel and made millions, Mildred wants to "puddle" in the stokehole to enrich herself, or as she confesses to her aunt, to "gorge [herself] and be happy." Read this way, Mildred's contact with the stokers both reinforces and subverts Yank's insistence that he "makes it move," casting Mildred as the engine to which Yank and the other stokers are fed (132).

Mildred's objectifying power is channeled through the stage directions to scene three. The men, "*stripped to the waist*," move in "*rhythmic motion*" to the "*throbbing beat of the engines*," charging the stokehole with an erotic energy that reimagines their work as a sexualized performance (134-35). This hyper-sexualized presentation of the men's bodies and their labor undercuts Yank's self-serious assertions that he "makes it hot," deflating his earlier boasts as comical eroticism. The men's positioning and shoveling expresses an automatonlike uniformity that marks them as mechanical servants rather than liberated individuals. Lined in a row along the furnace doors that they feed, the stokers shovel coal, "*looking neither to right nor left*," repeating until the engineers blow the whistle to break. They work in a "*mechanical regulated recurrence*" that, according to Thierry Dubost, dehumanizes them and "provides the audience

with a through line which highlights the characters' alienation" (135; Dubost, *Eugene* 108).[36] The stokers' eroticized appearance and mechanical movement marks them as organic tools for Mildred's satisfaction. This undermines Yank's authority, as it both deindividualizes him and visually realizes white workers' angst at their lost autonomy. Ralph Ciancio observes that the similarities between Yank and Brutus Jones, the protagonist of O'Neill's earlier play *The Emperor Jones* (1920), highlight capitalism's "perpetuation of slavery without regard to race," pointing up the importance of Yank's name as indicative of his place as "a native son whom materialistic forces have displaced" (57). The American worker and the American dream that he represents has become a less conspicuous perpetuation of slavery's past.

Mildred's presence in the stokehole actualizes the abstract power dynamic that controls Yank's life, forcing him to confront the impotence of his working-class masculinity in the face of the capitalist bourgeoisie. Imbued with the power of her class position, Mildred arrests the masculine output, compelling the men to halt their labor, "*dumbfounded by the spectacle*" of Mildred in the stokehole. Yank is especially affected by Mildred's presence, turning "*to stone*," a reversion back from his previous position as "man of steel," when he looks into her eyes (137). Although Yank is incapable of articulating the injury at "*the very heart of his pride*" inflicted by Mildred's presence in the stokehole, the implications of her transgression are clear: Mildred's anemic femininity equally opposes Yank's virile masculinity, exposing the artificiality of his power within the capitalist structure that imprisons him (137). In their meeting, O'Neill again evokes whiteness to distinguish between Mildred's pristine wealthiness and Yank's besmirched poverty. She is "rich white" while he is "poor white," further elucidating concepts of white

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[36] This alienation was achieved to great effect in the Kamerny production, which had the stokers shovel in unison for seven straight minutes before beginning the scene, a choice that both indulged in the physical expressiveness and oppressive repetitiveness and excruciation of their work (Posner 6).

anxiety over becoming labor slaves. All of Yank's practical logic fails to explain Mildred's capacity to transcend the "*white steel*" boundaries of the ship that imprisons him, problematizing his belief that raw muscularity dictates one's social standing (121). Mildred possesses an impunity that allows her to freely move across class boundaries and supersede laws and regulations, something Yank's work will never afford him.

In the wake of this cross-cultural encounter, Yank is set adrift, as any attempts to question the capitalist system that profits from his work would require him to reckon with the artifice of his masculine performance. Unwilling, or unable, to conceptualize the complex and abstract social hierarchies that control his life, Yank must, as James A. Robinson explains, "conceive his situation as that of the traditional tragic hero in conflict with an immutable force that transcends social concerns" to justify his working-class masculinity as a necessary characteristic for survival (105-06). As a result, what could be an opportunity for self-reflection becomes a re-intrenched conviction that the labor battle is a têt-a-têt meant to vindicate Yank's working-class masculine individualism at the cost of perpetuating the exploitation inflicted upon his class.

Yank's need to prove his masculinity leads him to intensify his masculine performance by extended exposure to the harmful coal soot that coats the stokers as they work. In doing this, Yank reveals the dual ironies of his white male performativity: The soot literalizes the self-inflicted harm resulting from such masculine bravado and brings to the fore the racial anxieties that underscore such behavior. While the other stokers have washed off the soot, Yank refuses to clean his face or body, marking him "*in contrast*" to the others as a "*blackened*" and "*brooding figure*" (138). Annalisa Brugnoli, in her analysis of the play, defines Yank's choice to leave himself unwashed as a deliberate symbolic protest against Mildred's "'dead white'" intrusion

into his workspace by reaffirming his contrasting and defiant "blackness" (45). John Nickel calls this what it is: "Yank is, in effect, in blackface" (34). Yank's soot-stained face, like O'Neill's conception of the stokehole, resists eugenicist arguments of the period, like those perpetuated by Stoddard, that simultaneously evince white superiority while imagining a white working-class erasure through an ironic use of blackface to visually express the regressive effects of Yank's hyper masculinity. It is not the Black or immigrant worker, the play contests, that is killing the white worker, but the white worker himself. As Nickel explains, "by having a white man 'become' black and quickly regress, O'Neill seeks to convince his audience that degeneration is not biological—or racial—but cultural" (35). What is more, the soot provides a provocative visualization of Yank's complicity in both his physical malformation and psychological regression. believing that this act of physical toughness will counter Mildred's psychic disruption, Yank *chooses* to expose himself to and be synonymous with toxicity. As an act of defiance, this is entirely ineffective.

From here, Yank suffers ever greater falls because of his unwillingness to look beyond his working-class masculine self. In each subsequent scene following his encounter with Mildred, Yank experiences opportunities for self-realization and rehabilitation that could allow him to break free from the oppression of his masculine position and possibly enact change to better his working-class community. However, Yank's refusal to acknowledge his own problematic worldview prevents him from ever moving beyond violent vendettas. The final four scenes of the play function on a cycle of confrontation and defeat that push Yank to greater desires for violence. This "reveals [Yank] to be," as Walker points out, "a particular kind of lumpenproletarian, . . . who not only is ineducable on the subject of class conflict but persists in maintaining a specifically masculinist view that *might makes right*." (Walker, *Expressionism*

140; emphasis added).[37] We see this in scene five when Yank attempts to retaliate against Mildred and the "white-collar stiffs" of "Fif' Avenoo" by enacting his own transgression into their class space. Swaggering onto the scene, Yank attempts to assault, insult, and destroy the Fifth Avenue churchgoers and their high-class boulevard, but is rendered impotent. He cannot hit the crowd and is unable to tear out the concrete sidewalk. Like Mildred's spectral imperviousness aboard the ship, the Fifth Avenue crowd appears phantasmagoric, gliding like "*genteel breezes*" across a plane of existence beyond Yank's firmly material, muscular corporeality (O'Neill, *Hairy Ape* 144).[38] And although this scene and Yank's subsequent arrest enlighten him to the reality that "steel—where I tought I belonged" is in fact made for "[c]ages, cells, locks, bolts, bars" to imprison him, his unwillingness to relinquish his primal masculinity and its accompanying expressions of muscularity dooms him in the end (154).

Considering Yank's inability to grow, at least in any significant way, over the course of the play, it is little surprise that his journey ends at a gorilla exhibit at the Central Park Zoo. Drawn there by a dim sense of kinship between himself and the caged animal—Yank confides that he and the gorilla are of "de same club" (161)—the close of the play can be read as Yank's acceptance of the "subhuman identity [that] society has imposed on him" (Ciancio 49). As the final encounter in the play, Yank's interaction with the caged ape is a powerful and nonetheless

[37] According to Nathaniel Mills, "the lumpenproletariat names that which, for Marxism, doesn't matter or doesn't count. Marx and Engels coined the term to describe socioeconomic outsiders like drifters, transients, prostitutes, criminals, and outlaws. Because such individuals do not participate in industrial production and thus have no class identity or social place, Marx and Engels saw them as irrelevant to their epistemological and political interests" (2).
[38] This is further reinforced by the Fifth Avenue crowd's masked visages, which mark them as emotionless and detached from Yank. According Annalisa Brugnoli, the distance created between Yank and the wealthy elites of Fifth Avenue through the use of masks "effectively shows the two groups' inability not only to understand but to see one another" (46, 47). As Chura identifies in his analysis of vital contact in the play, "[t]hough there is cross-class juxtaposition" in this scene like there was between Mildred and Yank in scene two, "there is no interaction between Yank and the rich because the barrier transgression is not downward but upward. The change in setting—out of the stokehole and onto Fifth Avenue—enables the upper-class . . . to remain oblivious to Yank's presence" ("'Vital Contact'" 534).

rather heavy-handed metaphor on O'Neill's part. However, I find the ape a particularly provocative and tragicomical figure of both virile masculinity and racist caricature. As such, it is important to recognize the irony of the closing scene as a commentary on white anxieties toward work. As the model representative of the white worker, "*the very last word in what they are*," Yank's dismissal from the human race comically replicates the tragic future for Anglo-Americans imagined by racists ideologues like Lothrop Stoddard and signals his disinheritance from the lineage of white social dominance (O'Neill, *Hairy Ape* 121). Stoddard was deeply concerned with the future of the "white world," and often warned of encroaching "colored armies . . . which would swamp whole populations and turn countries now white into *colored man's lands*" (vi; emphasis added). The gorilla in the scene, then, can be understood, in racist terms, as the embodiment of the non-white races. However, O'Neill refuses such assertions of racial essentialism by presenting the gorilla as a reflection of, not a foil for, Yank.

Unable to separate himself from the identity that he has cultivated in response to his work, Yank frees the ape from his cage to enact a final violent revenge against Mildred and the steel company. Trapped inextricably in his corporeality, as Walker posits, Yank still believes that he may gain a semblance of autonomy by maximizing the physical sacrifice of masculine labor to strike back at the bourgeoisie (*Expressionism* 149). What Yank does not consider is that the ape as his parallel cannot ally with him. As creatures under capitalist control, they are both in a fight to gain dominance over the other. Just as Yank fought to ensure his dominance amongst the stokers, the ape attacks and kills Yank to ensure its dominance, leaving Yank to die in the cage. Even in death, Yank cannot resist an insult to the ape's masculinity: bones crushed by the ape's powerful arms, Yank retorts, "Hey, I didn't say kiss me!" It is this immutability—played for laughs—that is perhaps the most comically dark takeaway from O'Neill's play, the impossibility

of evoking change within this community of white working-class men who perpetuate their own self-destruction, even in the face of death (163).

The play closes on a grim image of where this kind of working-class masculinity will get those so deeply entrenched in it. Yank's final resting place, much like his place of living and laboring, is, on a certain level, a cage of his own making, a prison of his own narrowmindedness that keeps him from enacting productive change to improve his and his fellow workers' conditions. Although the cages were made from corporate steel—the Mildreds and the masked Fifth Avenue movers and shakers that loom large over Yank's labor—it is Yank who calls them home, and adamantly refuses to change in the face of an oppressive labor system that aims to eke out every last bit of his life before disposing of him. This unflinching examination and condemnation of working-class masculinity makes O'Neill's play a significant and prescient work, especially in the United States, as we see a rise in populism embodied in Trumpism and a misguided faith in benevolent capitalism as represented by companies like Amazon take hold. A large swath of Trump supporters in rural and middle America who come from working-class communities see salvation in the capitalist machine that has disenfranchised them.[39] While these modern laborers suffer from post-industrial conditions that have largely eliminated the kind of work that Yank cherished—making them choice targets for companies like Amazon to exploit local demand for employment—like Yank, these working-class Americans find themselves in eerily comparable positions as they work in the tedious, menial, and highly regulated warehouses of Amazon distribution centers across the country. And like Yank, they hold so tightly to their

[39] A central issue of Trump's campaign was to ennoble the "forgotten men and women" of American who feel that they have been left behind by liberal elites. The term "forgotten man," coined in the nineteenth century by William Graham Sumner, has long been used to ingratiate politicians to white working-class Americans who feel that a chameleonic "other" is the root of their economic and cultural woes. See Donald Trump's "The Inaugural Address" (2017) and William Graham Sumner's *The Forgotten man and Other Essays* (1919).

labor as a marker of their selfhood that they cannot see the harm they are inflicting on themselves by supporting a system that seeks to dismantle rights instituted to empower them.[40] It is no surprise then that the play struck a chord during its revival at the Park Avenue Armory in 2017, three months after Trump's election. Bobby Cannavale, the actor who played Yank in the revival elucidates, "It's a hundred-year-old play, but it feels like this guy could be here right now." Speaking of the "Rust Belt" workers that he related to while preparing for the role, Cannavale notes the painful realization that must have occurred during the decline of these regional industries: "they were giants of industry, and [now] they have to form all that at Wal-Mart?"

Through Yank, O'Neill captures the self-perpetuating trauma of a kind of working-class masculinity at the turn of the century that hindered progress towards a more equitable and rewarding working-class identity. Although the capitalist system that oppresses Yank and the labor class that he represents is, undoubtedly, the villain of the play and, I would argue, modern labor woes, O'Neill's abstraction of the system, allowing it to dematerialize from Mildred into a nebulous and largely apathetic construct of control, forces the viewer to consider the laborer's role in the system and perpetuation of oppression. It is this aspect of discussions of labor literature and labor rights that is so significant and often ignored. How do you fix an exploitative system in which the oppressed are manipulated into complicity in their own oppression? O'Neill stops short of providing an answer to this question, but *The Hairy Ape* asks us to begin an important discussion on how to address it.

[40] As one example, in April 2021, Amazon workers voted against unionization at an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama. For an extensive look at how Amazon has reshaped American labor, see Alec MacGillis' investigative work, *Fulfilment: Winning and Losing in One-Click America* (2021).

Hero to Zero: *The Adding Machine*, The Cowboy Mythos, and The Dystopian Future of "them damn figgers!"

Similar to *The Hairy Ape*, which opens within the suffocating bowels of a steam ship, Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923) begins in the cramped bedroom of Mr. and Mrs. Zero. However, whereas *Hairy Ape* introduces Yank as he ferociously asserts his dominance amongst the raucous crew of the ship, *The Adding Machine* introduces its protagonist, Zero, as he is berated by his wife for watching too many Western films. In Mrs. Zero's opening monologue, which comprises the entire first scene of the play—Zero is not allowed to speak until scene two—she bemoans the prevalence of "them Westerns" and "all of them cowboys ridin' around an' foolin' with them ropes" (67). Mrs. Zero's fatigue with cowboy cinema points up the prevalence of these films in the early twentieth century, and their mass appeal, especially to male viewers, like Zero, who idolized the rough-riding heroes as symbols of a bygone era of American masculinity. In contrast to these virile western roamers, Zero is a "*thin, sallow, undersized, and partially bald*" man enfeebled and spiritually malnourished by his repetitive and menial work as a department store accountant (67). The chasm between the vigorous cowboy and Zero is captured in the opening scene by Zero's immobility as he lies prostrate on his bed. From here, the play in many ways parodies the plotline of a typical Western, with our feckless hero killing his boss in a blind fury after being fired from his job and setting off for the posthumous wild west of the Elysian fields after he is executed for the murder. However, even in the infinitude of the afterlife, Zero cannot ignore his programming and inevitably abandons romance and free will to take up cosmic accounting before being duped into returning to Earth to continue his degenerative cycle of reincarnation as evermore lowly workers.

Undoubtedly, Rice's juxtaposition of these images of American masculinity—the brusque cowboy with the wimpy office worker—draws the audience's attention to the ways modern industrial practices, specifically the mechanization and efficiency sciences of the twentieth century, have, in Rice's own words, denigrated the laborer to "one of the slave souls who are both the raw material and the product of a mechanized society" (*Minority Report* 190). However, Rice's allusion to western films and the cowboy symbol should not be read as nostalgic call for a bygone era of masculine self-determinism that apotheosizes white male heroism as the cure to the soul sickness of industrial mechanization and mass culture. In contrast, Rice's evocation of the cowboy figure comments on these flawed imaginings of a better, freer, *whiter* past—made more enticing by the dehumanizing mechanical innovations of the twentieth century—and how they play into and (ironically) undermine white supremacist justifications for restricting non-white workers' upward mobility.

This is captured explicitly in the courtroom scene wherein Zero conflates his labor anxiety and his race hatred in a stream-of-conscious confession that articulates the ways white anxiety concerning labor autonomy both fuels and derives from the progress made by workers of color in the early twentieth century. In Zero's attempt to rationalize why he killed his boss, he is repeatedly distracted by the "damn figgers"—the endless stream of numbers that occupies him at work—that lead him into seemingly unrelated recollections (82). One of these recollections is of a Black man—who Zero repeatedly calls "the dirty nigger"—who steps on Zero's foot in a crowded subway (84). The memory weds the work conditions that have diminished Zero's sense of his own manhood and individuality—the "damn figgers" that overwhelm him—to his discomfort with the marginal shifts in equality between white and Black Americans—the "dirty nigger" that threatens his social stability. The obvious rhyme of the two words brings together

the underlying tensions of Zero's emasculation and confronts the uglier aspects of white labor grievances. In examining *The Adding Machine*'s depiction of mass labor through Zero's anxiety over the marginal developments in racial equality, this section explores how work anxieties intersect with seemingly disparate social events to present a new way of understanding Expressionist theater's imaginings of mass labor and worker automatism.

The Close of Westward Expansion and the Rise of Cowboy Cinema

Surprisingly little scholarship attends to the play's racial aspects. While Anthony Palmieri extensively tracks Rice's wide-ranging commitment to social justice, he makes only passing mention of the racial elements of *The Adding Machine*. For Palmieri, and most other critics of *The Adding Machine*, at the center of Rice's play is a critique of the homogeneity of modern mass culture, a position that marks Zero as a reactive participant in moments of social animosity. When Palmieri does speak on Zero's racism, he denotes the influence of mob mentality, attributing Zero's racism to the partygoers' racist remarks from the dinner-party scene (64-65). Similarly, Christopher Wilson reads Zero as a representative of "a kind of mass unconscious made normative: a dream-life of mass culture made to dictate clerical desire" (149). This desire, Wilson argues, creates an insatiable need for headlines—primarily mass communication and entertainment—to compensate for a vapid identity: "Not knowing what to ask for, these minds stray into fantasies of headlines—headlines that, in turn, become catalysts for how they act." Interestingly, Wilson gestures toward Zero's violence, writing that these headline fantasies "are rewritten into dreams of revenge or suicide," but he avoids specifying how exactly these dreams manifest (154). Similarly, Robert Hogan contends that *The Adding Machine*'s popularity amongst performers and audiences is due in part to its attendance to the

psychological alongside the social, making it "less tied to a particular social problem, political issue, or period of modern history" (31). Nevertheless, Hogan recognizes Rice's inclusion of racist tangents in Zero's court-room monologue as an effective means of alienating the audience from Zero and expressing the "horror [of] a system which creates Zeros" (35). Craig Owens contends that Rice's critique of the capitalist system centers on the incompatibility between "the American myth of 'rugged individualism'" derived from "the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and . . . theories of laissez-faire capitalism and self-sufficiency" and the realities of "advanced capitalism," which "renders these ideals impossible" (70). Arguing that *The Adding Machine* "[recognizes] the vacuity and contemporary irrelevance . . . of the mythologies of rugged individualism, Jeffersonian agrarianism, Toquevillian self-interest, and Emersonian self - reliance," Owens nevertheless asserts that it retains "a strong sense of nostalgia for these ideals, inviting audiences and readers to imagine and long for a preindustrial, prelapsarian, extra-ideological period during which these individualist aspirations were widely achievable" (70). I disagree with Owens' analysis of the play, as I find Zero's infatuation with violence as means of asserting autonomy an explicit critique of this imagined, "prelapsarian," age when men possessed brutal authority. As such, *The Adding Machine* comments on both the impersonality of the present and the brutality of the past, citing the tension at their intersection as the fundamental point of rupture for modern American men. In *The Adding Machine*, this is cleverly expressed through an evocation of the Western as a massified and homogenized form of entertainment that mythologized the cowboy and his mastery of nature and the savage others that inhabit it through professionalized violence.

As film scholars have posited, cowboy cinema came to prominence in the wake of Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893), in

which he proclaims that the American frontier was conquered and with it the central impetus of America's pioneering spirit, providing "a tonic" to keep alive the American "myth of its exceptional frontier experience" (Gann 216-17).[41] Turner observes that the 1890 census rung the death knell of the American frontier with its conclusion that "the unsettled area [of the western frontier] has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line." The abrupt end to this westward expansion, according to Turner, cut off access to "the forces dominating American character" born from the "perennial rebirth" and evolution of America through its confrontations with "primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier" (Turner). Despondent at the notion that American adventurism ended with the close of westward expansion and the prospect that life would become a cycle of grim mundanity, Americans could take solace in cinema's "broad vistas and rugged Anglo Americans pursuing traditional individualistic values" (Gann 217). Americans seemed to jump at the opportunity. By 1910, western films were so popular that they constituted 21% of all American films made (Buscombe 24). However, while western films recaptured the mysterious and wonderful potential of the west, by the 1920s the primary appeal of these movies stemmed from their glorification of white male autonomy. As Marilyn Yaquinto explains:

> Although the landscape of the western is vital to its appeal, taking place at Turner's "frontier line," it is the story about the individual cowboy's transformation within such an environment that makes it such an allegory for the nation. The individual's fate . . . is on

[41] In a particularly interesting case of serendipity, Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" was first read at the same exposition that Thomas Edison showcased his kinetoscope, the progenitor of the movie projector that would soon display westerns for a voracious American audience (Gann 216). For additional discussion of the western's role in a post-frontier America, see Edward Buscombe's *The BFI Companion to the Western* (1988); William W. Savage, Jr.'s *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History and Culture* (1979); Andrew Brodie Smith's *Shooting Cowboys and Indians: Silent Western Films, American Culture, and the Birth of Hollywood* (2003); and Marilyn Yaquinto's chapter "Frontier Ambitions and Cowboy Narratives" in her book titled *Policing the World on Screen: American Mythologies and Hollywood's Rogue Crimefighters* (2019).

> display, with the hero riding off into the sunset—ceaselessly heading west—and with urban life, capitalist development, and a taming domesticity following close behind. (30)

These pursuing modernities, all perceived factors in Zero's emasculation and automatism in the play, make for daunting pursuers and necessitate a violent response to their feminizing effects. Therefore, the myth of the cowboy, Yaquinto observes, "centers on a particular performance of masculinity—one specifically defined by toughness and epitomized by the gunfighter, a professionally violent man prized for his frontier battles and unchecked autonomy, with the ability to deploy his special skills when he deems it necessary" (29). In the 1920s, the cinematic violence is ratcheted up, as increased emphasis on the shootouts and physicality of the cowboy was used to compensate for declining genre interest. By the time that *The Adding Machine* is set, the cowboy genre is ostensibly "shoot-'em-up" schlock largely targeted at young boys as a matinee distraction in rural and second-tier movie theaters.[42]

Important to my discussion is the genre's commitment to formulaic storytelling at the behest of the audience. Fans, especially male fans, became serious aficionados, prizing their ability to easily "sketch you a map" of the film's narrative and scenic structure and vehemently opposing any deviations from the formula (A. Smith 196-97). It is unsurprising that Zero would be drawn to movies that routinize the white male protagonist's victory over women and wilderness, as such a pattern counters Zero's bleak cyclical of reincarnation as a perpetually less fulfilling iteration of himself. In this way, the films provide Zero both wish fulfillment and unrecognized reflections of his reality, a conceit that the play humorously engages with through its fantastical journey from the mundanity of Zero's mechanical life to his stint in the ethereal plains of the afterlife. Reading Zero in this way, one can imagine his narrative arc as a kind of

[42] For an in-depth discussion of cowboy cinema of the 1920s, see Andrew Brodie Smith.

satirical riff on the western picaresque, with Zero serving as the milquetoast hero who escapes his doldrum life through a hysterical outburst of violence that results in his employer's death and Zero's execution. Transported to the lawless afterlife of Elysium, Zero is incapable of appreciating his newfound freedom, choosing instead his priggishness and mechanical accounting work. A choice that finds him sent back to earth to be reincarnated as another lesser iteration of his mechanical self.

Zero: The Emasculated Automaton

To establish Zero as the comic antithesis to the cowboy figure, Rice rightly minimizes Zero's on-stage presence to establish his subordination to the traditional cowboy foil: feminizing civilization. Often ignored in discussions of *The Adding Machine*'s commentary on modern mass labor is the gendered tension that underlies much of Zero's anxiety concerning his work and his role in society. The play introduces Zero both spatially and physically as a passive figure degenerated by his sedentary, repetitive, white-collar labor and his torpid middle-class life. Importantly, the play opens with Zero in bed against the back wall of the set near the drawn windows, with only his "*head and shoulders visible*" above the sheets, while Mrs. Zero goes through her nightly routine in the foreground of a room papered over with "*columns of figures*" across the walls (1). This opening image provides a sardonic representation of his stagnation and confinement. Unlike the free-roaming cowboy, Zero is introduced as a captive to the cozy clutches of a down comforter (67). Zero is bound up in his bedding, diminished by the comforts of city living and a sedentary job, a kind of dead thing compared to his vivacious and talkative wife who dominates the scene. This visual language echoes across the play, repeated when Zero rises from a prostrate position in his coffin in scene five with only his head initially visible and

again in the final scene of the play when Zero is found nearly buried in the receipt paper that blankets the room and "*chokes the doorways*" (123). The suggestion then, in the opening of the play, is that Zero is already spiritually deceased, a Bartleby of the twentieth century, habituated to the banal routines of work and leisure.

In addition to Zero's physical smallness in the scene, his passivity toward his wife's critiques of him—which also signals the frequency with which he hears them—highlights his status as a browbeaten and thoroughly domesticated man. The bulk of Mrs. Zero's monologue reflects on her poor decision making in choosing Zero for a husband, undermining Zero's masculinity and business acumen according to Darwinian concepts of virile masculinity and survival-of-the-fittest exceptionalism. Mrs. Zero undercuts Zero's fragile sense of self-worth by calling attention to the sedentary nature of his job that is both a jab at his physical infirmity and his career impotence. Because Zero conducts his work while "sittin' on a chair all day, just addin' figgers," Mrs. Zero implies that it is less meaningful than other more strenuous work, including her own more physically demanding household labor (4). Mrs. Zero even goes so far as to suggest that Zero's work is less a job than a preoccupation, implied by her critique that he spends his days simply "waitin' for five-thirty," rather than producing anything of meaning or value, prodding at an insecurity for white-collar men who found the abstract nature of their work to undercut the legitimacy of their profession (4). Not only does this call into question the value of Zero and his work, equating his unproductiveness to the cowboy *foolin'* that agitated her in the western movies, it also unsettles Zero's position as the male breadwinner of the family. This is reinforced visually in the scene by Zero's recumbent position in bed, which is set behind his wife on the stage. This positioning and Zero's resigned silence in response to his wife's harangues highlights his submissiveness.

Although he still technically "brings home the bacon," Mrs. Zero is insistent upon her greater sacrifices and purpose in the marriage dichotomy: "I'd like to know where you'd be without me. An' what have I got to show for it?—*slavin' my life away to give you a home*" (5; emphasis added). While the language of homemaking is traditionally gendered to articulate a desire for nesting by the stay-at-home wife/mother, it is clear through Mrs. Zero's accusatory tone and the choice of *give* over *make* that she is subverting this meaning to argue for her dominant role in the relationship. It is she that slaves and provides while Zero putters around until the whistle sounds. This inversion of the marriage dynamic, according to Mrs. Zero, is the result of Zero's inability to climb the corporate ladder, failing after twenty-five years to move beyond his entry-level position at the department store. What is genuinely tragic about Mrs. Zero's invective is that it relies upon the same corporate logic that manifested, and continues to manifest, so much masculine anxiety concerning self-worth and employment. In Mrs. Zero's estimation, Zero has little reason other than an inherent deficiency to justify his professional failings.

Mrs. Zero's estimations of her husband are codified when Zero loses his job to the forces of mechanical innovation and corporate cost cutting. While Zero assures himself that he is guaranteed a promotion because of his unflagging dedication to his job, resting on outmoded notions of corporate loyalty to imagine himself on the precipice of professional assent, the dictates of efficiency management determine Zero obsolete in comparison to advanced machines that can operate at greater speeds and with less professional supervision or professional knowhow. When Zero's boss realizes that Zero has held the same position for twenty-five years—"Twenty-five years! That's a long time"—his extended time in the position seems more a company oversight than a mark of professional accomplishment—"And you've been doing the

same work all the time" (27). Thus, Zero's place as a 25-year veteran is transmogrified from a marker of his devotion into another indictment of his failure as a man to climb the corporate ranks to a higher position.

Upon learning of his termination, Zero reels into a momentary mania, which is captured through some magnificent stagecraft. The stage begins to revolve while merry-go-round music plays as Zero is forced to confront the reality of his position within the corporate system. As the boss explains why Zero is being replaced, the music grows increasingly louder and more chaotic, and the stage's revolutions increase in speed, capturing Zero's psychic break. The boss must compete with the clamor of both the music and "*every off-stage effect of the theatre*" while the stage's spinning increases and the haunting "figgers" that follow Zero from scene to scene throughout the play cast across wall. If the opening scene of the play intends to capture Zero's obsequiousness, then this visual outburst highlights an emotional explosion. As the scene breaks down into sensory chaos, the boss' words are rendered down to unctuous corporate platitudes: "no other alternatives—greatly regret—old employee—efficiency—economy—business—*business*—BUSINESS" (29). Such programmatic speech, Owens recognizes, becomes an "invocation of mechanized efficiency . . . preserving only its most significant terms, and condensing his words into the most efficient conveyers of meaning" (72). This dramatic breakdown is met with a crescendo of sound, punctuated by a thunderclap, a flash of red across the stage, and the implied action of Zero stabbing his boss to death with a bill-file.

Zero's attack marks an important stylistic shift in the play. The cacophonous conclusion to scene two signals the play's turn into full-on expressionism, as the remaining scenes, beginning with Zero's trial in scene four, become increasingly more fantastical. This stylistic ebullition of expressionist fantasia into what was a relatively grounded narrative projects onto

the stage Zero's psychic discontent, exposing the toxic anxieties that have simmered under his bland surface. In the trial scene, Rice's use of stream-of-conscious monologue, reminiscent of Mrs. Zero's from act one, to articulate the interplay between Zero's subconscious fears of race replacement and his conscious fears of mechanical replacement. Initially, Zero tries to justify the killing in terms of labor injustice, emphasizing his impeccable attendance and devotion to his company—"Never missed a day, and never more'n five minutes late"—to articulate his boss' cruelty in firing Zero after twenty five years of loyal service (55). Such an argument highlights the callousness of capital's single-mindedness when it comes to technological innovation and efficiency management. Yet, Zero cannot stay on this bent for long; or, rather, one might suspect that Rice grows bored with the trite flippancy and apathy of the stock character. The boss becomes a formality more than a foe, as Christopher Wilson recognizes; Rice kills the boss to eliminate "the direct representation of vertical class conflict": "The soon-absent boss becomes a kind of nonpresence, a sign that Rice's interest is not in visible oppression but in the prison in Zero's own mind" (150). Like O'Neill's choice to atomize Mildred and the Douglas Steel company into an insidious diffusion of systemic oppression that extends even into Yank's psyche, Rice chooses to complicate Zero's oppression by making him culpable in his own misery by having him misinterpret his failings as the result of Machiavellian forces that loom over him—the "damned figgers" that Zero has imagined from the start of the play.

The extent to which Zero imbues these "figgers" with his existential woes is made clear in his explanation that the numbers become to him living beings that possess human qualities. "Them figgers," Zero explains, "They look like people sometimes. The eights, see? Two dots for the eyes and a dot for the nose. An' a line. That's the mouth, see?" (55). It would be fair to consider Zero's anthropomorphizing a symptom of his neurotic number counting, an

uncontrolled effluence of "conditioned-response tabulation of meaningless digits," but the extent to which these numbers are present throughout the play demands careful consideration of who or what exactly Zero sees in the numbers (Hogan 35). The immediate response may be to assume that the numbers represent, as Robert Hogan posits, the meaningless regurgitations of "Zero's zombie-like intelligence," or as the disembodied omnipresence of Zero's labor and therefore the boss that he kills (35). However, such a reading ignores the larger impetus for Zero's monologue in the scene: his desire to vindicate himself against what he perceives to be a world steadily turning against him—a hardworking *white* man. Considering the bulk of Zero's monologue focuses on the abuses endured, such a personification should be read as a far more malevolent representation of Zero's bigoted mathematics of justice.

Zero's angst toward the "damn figgers" that portend his obsolescence is rooted in a racial fear of being outpaced by Black workers, who were gaining ground in the workforce.[43] This is exposed in Zero's outburst of racist accounting while he babbles before the judge. Caught up in the narratives he is telling, Zero stumbles into a recollection of an event on the subway when a Black rider stepped on his foot as a rush of passengers boarded the car:

> I was readin' about a lynchin', see? Down in Georgia. They took the nigger an' they tied him to a tree. An' they poured kerosene on him and lit a big fire under him. The dirty nigger! Boy, I'd of liked to been there, with a gat in each hand, pumpin' him full of lead. I was readin' about it in the subway, see? Right at Times Square where the big crowd gets on. An' all of a sudden this big nigger steps right on my foot. It was lucky for him I

[43] As a representation of the average American white worker of the time, Zero is not selective in his xenophobia. Throughout the play he engages in various racial slurs. During the trial, Zero also complains about the "dirty sheenies" (Jews), get two holidays off to his one because of "Young Kipper an' the other one," Zero here mispronouncing Yom Kippur and possibly referring to Rosh Hashanah (83). For Zero, such religious considerations represent biases against him as a worker.

> didn't have a gun on me. I'd of killed him sure, I guess. I guess he couldn't help it all right on account of the crowd, but a nigger's got no right to step on a white man's foot. (58)

Although Zero's middle-class programming compels him to concede the incident was likely the result of the crowded subway, he nevertheless asserts that the man should know his place, seeing the event as a social transgression deserving of the extreme violence reported in the newspaper article. Like the partygoers turned jurors who, in the previous scene, chanted "Damn foreigners! Damn dagoes! Damn Catholics! Damn sheenies! Damn niggers! Jail 'em! Shoot 'em! hang 'em! lynch 'em! burn 'em!" before bursting into a bar of "America (My Country, 'Tis of Thee)," Zero cannot stand for such offenses and imagines himself as a kind of modern vigilante duty-bound to regulate Black people's movement through so-called white spaces (47).

This is presented through Zero's cowboy-inspired imagining of his role in both the lynching and the altercation with the man on the subway, in which Zero envisions himself with guns akimbo, "pumpin' him full of lead." Not only does such a reaction articulate Zero's fantasy of the frontier morality codified in cowboy cinema, but it also draws directly from famous cowboy actor William S. Hart, who invented the two-gun pose during his heyday in cowboy cinema of the 1910s. The actor, famous for his virile masculinity, was also an adamant white supremacist who baked into his films a Victorian conception of frontier masculinity that represented white frontiersmen as noble and powerful masters of the savage west they worked within (A. Smith 171-72). This is especially evident in Hart's 1916 film *The Aryan*, in which he plays cowboy Steve Denton who abandons the white race for a gang of Mexicans and "half breeds" after being betrayed by a white woman who double-crosses him and steals his gold. Denton's sense of responsibility to his race is reignited by a chance encounter with a

frontierswoman who convinces him that it is his duty to protect white Western migrants from the horrors of his nonwhite cohort. The film concludes with Denton organizing an attack against his former gang to save the travelers. Andrew Brodie Smith, in his analysis of the film, explains that this depiction of cowboy violence was the first film to "clearly [connect] the hero's use of force . . . with the maintenance of white supremacy" (168).[44] Zero's fantasy of racial violence echoes Hart's cinematic display and functions as salve against his wounded pride. Like the bedroom scene that opens the play, Zero's recollection brings his disparate anxieties together into a singular panic, knitting his labor, gender, and race anxieties together to form a tapestry of social transgressions. Tying together the threads of Zero's subconscious shows that Zero's anxieties are, at least in part, a response to the broader social changes that he finds himself trapped within. More than simply a response to the changing face of work in the twentieth century, the "damn figgers" that loom over Zero throughout the play also encompass Zero's fears of the "dirty nigger" that disrupts his sense of place in the social order. Rather than concede the failure of a capitalist system that views him as an expendable machine, Zero attributes his failings to newly empowered outsiders who represent an encroaching threat to white labor security.

The Elysian Fields and the Super-Hyper-Adding Machine

The final three acts of the play stretch the fantastical limits of expressionism to depict Zero's ironic revulsion toward the idyllic fantasy of the liberatory frontier manifested in the Elysian Fields. Executed for the murder of his boss, Zero awakes in scene five as a corpse in a

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[44] Smith makes clear that cowboy cinema had long suggested such connections between violence and maintenance of white authority; however, *The Aryan* took the step of concretizing it for audiences. Such a step should not be so shocking considering the film came out the year after D.W. Griffith's racist Civil War drama, *Birth of a Nation* (1915). C. Gardner Sullivan, the writer of *The Aryan*, knowingly incorporated white supremacist ideology into his films to appeal to middle-class audiences, who celebrated a hero's willing to use violence to both ensure "racial order" and protect Christianity (168- 69).

graveyard, where he meets Shrdlu, a pious and self-loathing matricide who accompanies Zero into the Elysian Fields in scene six. Being murderers, Zero and Shrdlu's presence in the Elysian Fields appears to confute religious logic by flouting the precepts of holy judgment and the surety of Zero and Shrdlu's spiritual damnation. Far from the "unspeakable torments" that Shrdlu anticipates as eternal punishment for his sins, the two are free to do whatever they please in a natural paradise "*dotted with fine old trees and carpeted with rich grass and field flowers*" (90, 91). A scattering of brightly colored silk tents along a meadow crossed with pristine streams and set under a "*fleckless sky*" presents a reverie of the Western frontier that never was (91). In a shocking twist of fate, it seems that Zero has been rewarded for his violence by being transported to the apotheosis of the American frontier. To Shrdlu's dismay, he explains to Zero, the as-yet unnamed heavenly authorities "don't care" what anyone does in the afterlife (100). The only rule they set in place is that inhabitants must remain in the Elysian Fields until they understand. While Zero and Shrdlu never come to decrypt what they are tasked with understanding, it is clear that this exercise in self-reflection is an exercise in spiritual introspection aimed at rewarding the innocent and punishing the guilty. Like hell in Milton's *Paradis Lost*, the Elysian Fields appear to be a zone of consciousness in which one is free to "make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven" (29). As such, the tranquility of the Elysian Fields belies its torturous purpose—at least to Zero, who is incapable of relinquishing the moral absolutism of productivism, even in the face of celestial bliss. Zero's afterlife appears to be entirely his to determine, a space in which Zero's desires manifest his surroundings and dictate his cosmic destiny. The Elysian Fields, then, offer the opportunity to rest in, quite literally, the paradise of a post-work euphoria, one in which Zero can live uninhibited in the pastoral tranquility that often informs nostalgic critiques of modern

mass industry. This potentiality is made explicit by Shrdlu's disquieted observations on the habits of the other spirits living on the Elysian Fields:

> All these people here are so strange, so unlike the good people I've known. They seem to think of nothing but enjoyment or of wasting their time in profitless occupations. Some paint pictures from morning until night, or carve blocks of stone. Others write songs or put words together, day in and day out. Still others do nothing but lie under the trees and look at the sky. There are men who spend all their time reading books and women who think only of adorning themselves. And forever they are telling stories and laughing and singing and drinking and dancing. (101)

Of course, to Shrdlu and Zero none of this creative activity constitutes work as it is understood in capitalism, and so none of it is recognized as materially meaningful, or even morally right. To a man like Zero, whose labor logic vests productivity with absolute righteousness, the afterlife can only be conceived as an extension of industrial capitalism: "good people" do not think of enjoyment; "profitless occupations" are a waste of time; artistry and creativity are concomitant with immorality and degeneracy. Zero, the corporate automaton of the accounting room, cannot fathom the pleasures of eternal unemployment because it demands a kind of self-directed imagination associated with the individual. It demands a reckoning with life beyond work, a conception of self apart from one's work, a challenge Zero is unfit to surmount.

Zero's abhorrence toward the grandeur of limitless freedom is played to comedic effect when he ultimately refuses the boundless pleasures of the Elysian Fields, including a romantic relationship with his former co-worker and unrequited love Daisy, to return to the monotony of

the adding machine, now a giant calculator that Zero toils on endlessly.[45] Although the final scene of the play is perhaps its funniest, it is also its darkest and most damning. Zero's desire for the serenity of the adding machine's rote action is more than Rice's final lambaste of mass industry, it also opposes suppositions of white supremacy that blame social progress for white mediocrity. While Rice certainly sees mass industry as a malevolent force in society, evidenced by his abject horror at the regressive effects of mindless industrial occupation on the working class, he refuses to absolve Zero for his part in worshiping and thus perpetuating a system of oppression that wantonly exploits and discards workers with little regard for their well-being. The self-righteous logic of westward expansion—perpetuated under capitalism—festers as Zero's unearned sense of social superiority. Thus, the tragedy of Zero is that he is simultaneously the unwitting victim and accomplice.

Zero assumes, because he is white and male, that he deserves success; Rice rejects such an assumption as ignorant and hateful. As Lieutenant Charles, a celestial middle manager of the afterlife, explains to Zero in the play's concluding scene, Zero's entire spiritual journey has been a downward slide through exponentially more demeaning and dehumanizing lives: ironically, starting life as an autonomous monkey, only to be reborn into a series of lives as Egyptian, Roman, and English slaves; this work, Charles contends, at the least produced *something*. Now, the iron collar of slavery has turned white, and Zero's work has degenerated like his body into "a bunch of mush" that can be processed more efficiently by a machine (105). In Rice's accounting of American culture—in fact, world history—there is no meaningful exodus from the monotony and meaninglessness of Zero's habituated number counting, at least not for someone that has

[45] Designed by Lee Simonson, the adding machine in the original 1923 production of the play took up nearly the entirety of the stage, allowing Dudley Digges, the original actor to portray Zero, to walk atop it and press the giant buttons.

conceded so much of his identity to his labor, as Zero has. The pretense of white masculine superiority that Zero felt under threat is undermined by the realization that these grand narratives are built on the backs of nameless figures who labor to hold them up (the mass of Zeroes across centuries). This imagining, as Christopher Wilson explains, both reduces "all of creation [to] a white collar purgatory . . . envisioned as a many-layered corporation that simply reassigns its personnel" and reveals Zero's "very essence" to be "his willingness to have other . . . verdicts written onto his life without expressing his own will" (151, 152). While Zero wants to believe himself to be an individual deserving of praise and adoration for his devotion to work, he fails to recognize his own vacuousness and corporate America's disinterest. Even given the opportunity to formulate an autonomous identity apart from his work in the Elysium Fields of the afterlife, Zero can think of nothing more fulfilling than to return to his old role as adding machine, incapable of stopping his habituated labor functions under his own free will.

Conclusion

Such a nihilistic view of Zero posits an exponential fall for humankind, ironically described by Charles as the culmination of millions of years of human evolution, toward a near fully automated future in which the worker's body becomes valuable only as a piece of the operative "super-hyper-adding machine"—in Zero's case, the only part of his body that will be necessary to operate the machine is his big toe (106-07). The machine, installed in coal mines to register each shovel of coal scooped by a miner, will automatically track each miner's movements with a white "graphite pencil" set upon "a blackened, sensitized drum" that serves as a kind of seismographic calculator. From there, Zero would only need to "release a lever" with "the great toe of [his] right foot . . . which focuses a violet ray on the drum. The ray, playing

upon and through the white mark, falls upon a selenium cell which in turn sets the keys of the adding apparatus in motion. In this way the individual output of each miner is recorded without any human effort except the slight pressure of the great toe of your right foot" (106). In this hyperbolic progression of the mechanical realities of labor in the twentieth century, the worker possesses no unique value for their work, no skills, training, or professionalization—not even enviable output numbers—through which to assert autonomy and is instead merely a biological circuit in the larger system of actions necessary for the machine to do its job. Zero will contribute nothing beyond the impulse to contract his toe to depress the plate to activate the violet ray. Undoubtedly, this reads as a dystopian prophecy of a grim future in which man becomes not only surpassed by but also subservient to the machine; however, it is also presented as a fitting resolution to the audacity of Zero to believe that he was ever anything more than an automaton.

Considering the dissolution of the quintessential American image of the cowboy—the white supremacist emblem of manifest destiny—paired with the play's closing image of Zero as only a small, meaningless piece of the corporate machine, the concept of white exceptionalism falls apart. In this imagined future, *any* body (body rather than person being a key means of understanding Zero's dystopian nightmare) can operate the "super-hyper-adding machine," forcing a recognition of the artificiality of racist arguments for white superiority (106). In its reductive power to minimize workers to motor impulses, big toes depressing pedals, the super-hyper-adding machine of the future compels audiences and readers to recognize the indiscernibleness of workers—at least, in the productivity-focused eyes of an industrial machine more concerned with profits than human wellbeing. If white Americans are more evolved, as racist science would contest, this machine's existence compels one to ask why they have automated themselves into obsolescence? The bitter irony of Zero's spiritual decline is that it is

predestined by the very white supremacist ideology that is supposed to elevate him. His role as a white-collar worker—a social position largely exclusionary to African American workers—strips him of his autonomy and makes him subservient to the future machine. Considering the simplicity of this occupation, it is only a matter of time before it will be eliminated by the same efficiency management that led to his previous firing.

Chapter Three: "Quite Simply, a Work of Propaganda": Robert Cantwell, The Literary Left, and *The Land of Plenty*

The *New Masses* editor, Granville Hicks, in his review of Robert Cantwell's *The Land of Plenty* (1934), Cantwell's highly regarded second novel, applauds Cantwell's "unfailing accuracy" in representing "the incidents and the aspects of characters that present his subject most truly and most completely," but avers that the end of the novel "relies too much on obliqueness, and the heroism of the embattled workers is a little obscured" (25-26). Although the novel presents an empowering vision of rebellious mill workers in the Pacific Northwest who strike against the speed-ups, wage cuts, and layoffs resulting from management's overreliance on efficiency management, Hicks felt no "high resolve and a sense of ultimate triumph" in the novel's concluding image of the occupation falling to pieces under the heavy blows of the police. Such anticlimax, Hicks surmises, fails to "sweep the reader along," to enrapture them in the thrill of the workers' successful liberation from modern industrial labor (26). In essence, although unuttered, Hicks finds Cantwell's novel lacking in enough idealistic vigor to enervate the working class to revolution.

While Hicks' comments are directed at the novel's anti-climax, the somewhat dystopian fall of the workers under the iron heel of the lumber company and the local police force, they nevertheless feel dismissive of an otherwise revelatory work that represents "the earliest novel published in the United States to contain a fictionalized narrative of a factory occupation by mass industrial workers" (Scott 185). What is more, the novel appears particularly prophetic in hindsight, as it was published two years before the 1936 Firestone sitdown strike in Akron, Ohio kicked off a "wave of sitdown strikes and plant occupations" across the country (185).[46] This fact

[46] According to William Scott, by March of 1937, the peak of the sitdown strike wave, there were "170 sitdown strikes, involving 167,210 workers in various occupations" (191).

cannot be held against Hicks, but it does speak to the insight with which Cantwell wrote the novel, and brings to the fore a clearer sense of Cantwell's ambitions. In this way, Cantwell's novel is surprisingly prescient, and radically idealistic, exposing readers to the potentiality of a unified working-class response to the abuses of a corporate class intoxicated by the economic promises of efficiency management. These abuses, and their latent effects on American workers, were explored in the previous chapter on Expressionist drama. Unlike the Yanks and Zeros of earlier labor fiction, who were pitied for their suffering, Cantwell's workers are championed for their action.

Cantwell ripostes Hicks' assessment directly in a 3 July 1934 piece titled "Authors' Field Day: A Symposium on Marxist Criticism," where he expresses disappointment in Hicks' lack of practical analysis of a novel that Cantwell earnestly describes as "a work of propaganda" (27). One would not be remiss for thinking that Cantwell's audacious assertion about his novel was simply a jeer at the more conservative reviewers who emphasized what they perceived to be its propagandistic tendencies. Harold Strauss, in his review for *The New York Times*, laments that Cantwell's writing suffers from the "atrophying hand of theory" and the "cold, objective" style of proletarian literature. Repeatedly insinuating that Cantwell has been disabused of his artistic integrity by some shadowy "outside interest" that has "subsequently pushed upon Cantwell, directly and indirectly, the necessity of writing a truly proletarian novel," Strauss characterizes Cantwell as an artist who has been assimilated by the "Marxists and their essentially non-literary purpose" to churn out a slavishly propagandistic novel hobbled by what Strauss sees as the proletarian infatuation with "facts, facts, facts, and a crowning touch of pathos." Although Strauss resists using the term *propaganda* to describe Cantwell's novel, it is clear that he sees the novel and its author as victims of the tendentiousness of the proletarian movement. Herschell

Brickell, in his review for *The North American Review* is less subtle. Although Brickell calls *The Land of Plenty* “one of the best of the so-called proletarian novels,” he demurs that it is “good not because of its propaganda, but because Mr. Cantwell is a novelist who knows his material and handles it skillfully” (95). In both reviews, the reviewers object to what they perceive to be Cantwell’s ideological bias on the presumption that underneath this newly formed radical façade is a burgeoning artist waiting to be let loose. As Strauss asserts at the end of his review: “The severe tone of this review is largely owing to our opinion that Cantwell’s is still one of the most impressive new talents that has arrived in America in years.”

In a rather enigmatic reply to Hicks, Cantwell elaborates that he calls his novel propaganda because it tells the story of striking workers *without* the embellishments of revolutionary romance that may obfuscate the practical value of his work, which Cantwell describes as a process of “work[ing] out, in our imaginations, some of the problems the working-class must face in actuality.” While there was no one school of thought on what proletarian literature was (in fact, there was quite the dispute over how to define this type of fiction), one relatively common principle was the “stress upon the importance of representing the life of the proletariat . . . with strict verisimilitude” (Foley, *Radical* 111). What Cantwell wishes is for the critic and the fiction writer to question the realism of the fiction, to meditate on and improve the authenticity of the depiction in the hope that the author and critic “can fight out on paper some of the real battles that are coming” so that the worker may be “a little better prepared for them” when they arrive (“Author’s” 27). By Cantwell’s own logic, one may argue that his inability, or unwillingness, to envision revolution marks his novel as a failure. If Cantwell set his sights on the labor battles of the future, why does he resolve his novel with an all-too-familiar defeat that positions the workers as the ennobled losers? Perhaps, as this chapters argues, Cantwell’s

comments and his novel stem from the fact that there are other more immediate issues that need be addressed before tackling such lofty ideals as outright revolution, issues that have more to do with how critics, writers, and workers understand *the worker* and the work that they do within a capitalist system.

While the seeming incongruency between Cantwell's use of the term *propaganda* and its meaning leads Hicks to questions whether Cantwell actually understands what he means when he uses the term, I find Cantwell's assertion an evocative and intentional commentary on what he perceived to be one of the most confounding problems of both proletarian literature and worker activism: The accusation that pro-labor narratives were inherently propagandistic (Hicks, "Reply to Authors" 32). Taking Strauss and Brickell's comments as separate pieces of the same whole, one can see the way pro-labor narratives, especially fiction, were often paradoxically criticized for being pedantically accurate and ideologically biased, leaving one with the conundrum of whether to approach proletarian literature as indoctrination material or artistic expression. Through both his childhood experiences growing up in the working-class communities of Washington and his work as a labor journalist, Cantwell was particularly attuned to how the label *propaganda* was used as a political tool to maintain the status quo and defame workers' accounts of their lived experiences. By calling his novel a work of propaganda, Cantwell directly engages the unstable boundary between objectivity and subjectivity that beleaguered proletarian literature and in turn calls attention to the mythical conception of work and the obligation of the worker to dutifully perform work regardless of the conditions in which this work must be completed.

The Land of Plenty rejects the implication that the American work narrative, or any narrative for that matter, should function as an innate and liberatory ethos of the working class, instead positing that these nationalist mythologies are manufactured to subordinate workers and

delegitimize any efforts to disrupt the hegemonic narrative. This is perhaps best represented by the workers' recitation of "he'll say it anyway" to Hagen, the mill electrician and central protagonist of the first section of the novel, who attempts to secure a stable counter-narrative against the night shift manager Carl. This phrase highlights the workers' understanding that Carl's word, as representative of the mill's managerial elite, will always be seen as more authoritative—more official—than their own, and will be weighed unfairly against them in any dispute. It is the mill workers' eventual realization that their voices, their capacities to vocalize their self-actualization, have long been stifled by the oppressive hierarchy of modern industry that catalyzes their efforts to organize a revolt against the company. By centering the workers' reclamation of their voice as the proletarian thrust of the novel, Cantwell looks beyond the material problems of mass industry, mechanization, and efficiency management to consider the dehumanizing effects of narrative heteronomy. What begins as a cacophony of individual voices yelling into the void at the novel's beginning becomes a unified and egalitarian call to action.

"The Whole Story, With Everything Just a Little Bit Wrong": Narrative Control and Manipulation

From its beginning, *The Land of Plenty* foregrounds the ontological tensions between workers at a plywood factory, led by Hagen, and the management, embodied in the efficiency-expert-turned-foreman Carl Belcher. Opening the novel with a power outage that plunges the factory into absolute darkness, Cantwell disrupts the objectivity of the empirical realism favored by most proletarian writers for a kind of psychological realism that calls attention to the subjectivity of narrative, forcing the reader to grasp for an understanding of the factory and its workplace politics through the competing psyches of his characters. Part one of the novel, aptly

titled “Power and Light,” tracks the workers’ efforts to form their “disembodied and unreal” voices into a cogent accounting of the events during the outage (24). Aware that Carl will place blame for the outage and any subsequent damage to the mill or delay of the rush order that results from the outage on the workers, Hagen and the others reorganize their productive power into a system of narrative nodes to account for their actions and whereabouts in the mill throughout the night. As William Scott observes in his analysis of the novel, “the complex network of integrated operations” that defines the technological makeup of the factory “facilitates communication between” the “relatively isolated” workers via the “integrated machine processes” (205). The unique collaborative nature of the workers’ documentary labor brings long repressed grievances to the surface and illuminates the workers’ revolutionary potential as a collective group. Part one concludes with Carl firing Hagen and Winters, a longtime sawyer at the mill, for insubordination before the workers rally together and force the mill manager, MacMahon, to rescind the terminations, marking a momentary victory in which the workers realize their power to overwrite the official word.

However, on the following workday, Carl not only upholds Hagen and Winters’ dismissal, but also fires the workers who stood with them, which leads to a general strike at the factory. This begins part two of the novel, “The Education of a Worker,” which moves narrative focus more closely to Hagen’s son Johnny to explore his burgeoning class consciousness as he participates in the strike and bears witness to his community’s growing antagonism toward the workers. In this section of the novel, Carl’s power as narrative gatekeeper is eclipsed by the press as the far more dangerous and wide-reaching instrument to shape the public’s perception of the workers. Where Carl could only control the narrative of events within the factory, the newspaper, through its pervasiveness within both the community and the home and its presumed objectivity

as a source of information, possesses an unrivaled power to shape reality. This proves a crucial moment in the narrative and in Johnny's education, as the workers' entrance into the court of public opinion, which coincides with their initial walkout of the factory, both ensures their defeat at the novel's conclusion and reveals to Johnny the press' power to recast even peaceful protest as a vicious attack against factory management.

The news coverage of the inciting walkout is an important point at which to begin a discussion of the existential conflict at the heart of the novel, as the scene represents Cantwell's most direct commentary on the press as a tool for corporate propaganda. In Johnny's memory, the walkout is a jubilant parade that effervesces with the liberatory potential of peaceful resistance to authority. This is best captured in the jovial dancing of a young woman worker who trips along next to Johnny, "waving her lunch bucket . . . and letting her feet snap together," as the crowd moves in around the management office. The workers call up to the office workers to "*Come on out!*" and join their newly formed resistance (297). The surge of workers—both the night and day shift come together to protest the firings—appear to Johnny like an inspiring mass of comradery that packed "the space between the factory and the office" with a sense of deeper purpose and community (298). None of this, however, makes it into the paper's account of events. In the newspaper's report, the workers are depicted as a thuggish "mob which threatened for a time to get out of hand" as it "stormed the office" and "threatened the girls employed." Reading the newspaper report, Johnny is shocked at the dissonance between his memory of events and what is reported: "Instead of stopping work the day shift broke into disorder and forcibly shut off the motors, and instead of marching around the office calling '*Come on out!*' they all . . . milled steadily around the building, calling threats and were with difficulty induced to disband" (299, 300). Unsurprisingly, Johnny notes that these details were not the product of

the reporter's first-hand account but relayed by "officials of the company" (299). No factory workers were interviewed.

For Simon Cooper, the dissonance between Johnny's lived experience and the newspaper's reporting encapsulates the carnivalesque nature of the event, which both temporarily liberates the workers from the "official culture of the factory authorities" while ultimately reinforcing the "existing hierarchical structure" (127). Something that, this chapter argues, is shared with the proletarian movement and its efforts to legitimize its fiction as art. Although the moment felt liberating as the workers disrupted the daily order of the factory and flummoxed the management office, the act of rebellion ultimately serves to perpetuate and empower the existing system. Thus, Johnny's frustration with the newspaper's account of the walkout and his family's reaction to his counter narrative becomes a recognition that the strike may merely represent an "officially sanctioned upheaval" that ultimately reinvigorates capitalism and its oppressive structure by justifying the necessity of more repressive systems of control (Cooper 127).

This is realized when Johnny is confronted by his family about the walkout. Johnny is "dumbfounded" to learn that they "already knew more about it than he did," a response that signals the unsettling power of the "official word" of the company and the press to sway opinion and recast one's lived experience. Although Johnny was there and held onto the memory like a "powerful charm" against "the moments of despair," he is predisposed to assume he missed something, arrested by his family's endorsement of the report over his own account and the uncanny nature of the report's verisimilitudes. "There it was," Johnny observes, "the whole story, with everything just a little bit wrong," "it was all mixed up and no one could understand it" (299, 300). While Johnny senses the *wrongness* of the story, the jumbled quality of its

rendition, he struggles to reconcile the real from the reported. Responding to his sister's insinuations that he is lying about the walkout with several rhetorical questions aimed at vindicating his firsthand account, one must wonder if Johnny is also trying to convince himself of his own reality: "I was there, wasn't I? I was down there and saw it, wasn't I?" (300). In this moment of uncertainty, Johnny is unmoored from his sense of selfhood by the narrative power the factory holds over him to create reality.

Proletarian Writers' Critiques of the Press

Although the existential tension between narrative and reality is central to the plot of *The Land of Plenty*, Cantwell was not the only proletarian author suspicious of the press as a mouthpiece for corporations and millionaires. Writers from across the left saw the press as an immediate threat to labor efforts and often included at least passing reference to the press' influence on public opinion in their work. For example, Mary Heaton Vorse's *Strike!* and Ruth McKenney's *Industrial Valley* (1939), both inspired by the authors' labor reporting, highlight the collusive relationship between factory management, local officials, and the local press. In Vorse's novel, the local papers trade sympathetic coverage of the factory management's violent repression of the strike for advertisement revenue, while the press in McKenney's novel exercises selective coverage of protests and strike violence to downplay the severity of the situation in the city (126; 64-65). Grace Lumpkin's *A Sign for Cain* and Clara Weatherwax's *Marching! Marching!* (1935) take particular care to explore the way media reflects and refracts labor activism. Lumpkin's novel includes an exchange between a leftist publisher and a progressive writer concerning how to appropriately report the labor conditions of the time. In Weatherwax's *Marching! Marching!* the contrast between the official word and the word of the

worker is transposed directly onto the page through fictional newspaper articles laid out on opposing pages of the book like an uncanny collage. Weatherwax's decision to directly parallel the articles on the page—presenting the rhetoric of each group side by side—gives the reader a sense of the perceptual shades of dissonance between pro-labor and pro-business narratives. While a pro-business article sees the strike as the result of "alien agitators" disrupting the mill's attempt at negotiating "a peaceful settlement of labor disputes," a worker-friendly article reports that the workers' demands—which were properly voted upon and officially presented to a committee of factory managers—were roundly refused without any attempt at negotiation (211). And, amongst the objects and institutions that Dos Passos evokes to represent the United States in the opening chapter of his *U.S.A.* trilogy, he symbolizes the tensions between the official record and the voice of the people in the "old newspapers and dogeared historybooks with protests scrawled on the margins in pencil" (2). The distinction between the ink of the published materials and the pencil marks of resistance echoes Cantwell's concerns over the fragility of the worker's voice against the stolidity of the official record.

While scrutiny proves that proletarian authors' characterization of the press as an inherently antagonistic voice in labor discourse is an oversimplification of the rhetorical landscape of the 1930s, their concerns with the press' power to shape readers' opinions on labor issues focalizes a broader anxiety regarding corporate America's renewed efforts to skew labor discourse in the media. As Philip M. Glende argues, "labor news was covered with much greater sympathy and tolerance than critics then and now have asserted" (3). Unsurprisingly, news coverage of labor activity was diverse and colored by the various writers' and publishers' feelings on the subject. By no means a monolith, "news . . . was shaped by an interdependence of agents involved in the production of editorial content" (4). However, this did not prevent

journalists from embracing the drama on display during much labor activism to create "compelling story frames" in which to situate their reporting. Glende concedes, "collectively, and for the most part unintentionally, reporting worked to discredit unions" and labor activism by highlighting the interpersonal conflicts amongst workers and labor leaders (3). This focus on the disorganization of the labor movement served the broader efforts of mainstream print culture, including advertising, to insist upon the status quo, as opposed to radical reform, as the way through the economic tumult of the Great Depression.

Work, Advertising, and the Corporate Narrative

Faced with the possibility of civil unrest, leaders of print media and advertising viewed themselves as "agents of stability and social order" tasked with codifying, rather than changing, cultural thought concerning work and capitalism (Welky 12). As a result, Roland Marchand explains, "even in 1933, most national advertisements offered no direct reflection of the existence of the depression" (*Advertising* 288). Similarly, news of social and class conflicts, including working-class unrest, was rendered invisible to maintain a false sense of social order and harmony (Welky 8). According to David Welky, "mainstream newspapers, magazines, and books offered interpretations of contemporary difficulties that urged readers to adhere to ideological roots that drew from deep traditions rather than drift into the perilous seas of reform and perhaps revolution" (3-4). As a result, the American mainstream media apparatus "worked to convince readers that American society had no faults while downplaying the threat of radical reform" and "lauded the continuing relevance of the rags-to-riches, hard-work ethos even as the real world restricted opportunities for hard-working individualists" (Welky 4-5). In discussing trends in advertising during the 1930s, Marchand tracks the persistent reaffirmation of "the moral

necessity of hard work and of courageous commitment to the quest for economic success whatever the odds" (318). Unsurprisingly, as economic promises of middle-class affluence evaporated, a blue-collar kind of true-grit industriousness became the clarion call for economic and individual salvation.

Responding to the depravations of the Depression, advertisers turned away from the ostentation and luxury of earlier advertisement campaigns to produce "shirt-sleeve advertising" that promoted the industrial toughness associated with the mythological image of the indomitable workman (Marchand, *Advertising* 300). In a full-page advertisement from November 1929, the stock market crash is treated like a rough night of drinking: "All right, Mister," it scolds, "Now that the headache's over, Let's Go To Work!" (qtd in Marchand, *Advertising* 286). Similarly, advertisers during the 1930s produced ads flagellating themselves for their part in promulgating the indulgence and opulence of the 1920s that led to the Great Depression. These ads aimed to reinvent the dilettante ad man as a "hardboiled" salesman or dungaree-clad laborer "with sweat on their brows" (300). Like early-depression advertisements that pushed work as the remedy for America's collective "headache," these new prostrations idealized work as the necessary penance for the extravagances of the 1920s. Captured best in the persistent use of the image of the clenched fist to sell courage in the face of adversity, advertising cast economic recovery in do-or-die terms: "the American 'Everyman' either courageously clenched his fists, rolled up his sleeves, and struggled determinedly onward, or he slunk away from the battlefield in cowardice, confessing himself to be a quitter who was 'too scared to fight'" (325).

These vigorous efforts to enshrine traditional values toward work as immutable principles of American exceptionalism inspired the conception of the American Dream as we know it. Warren Susman proclaims that the modern conception of the "American Way of Life" and "The

American Dream" came sharply into focus in the American cultural conscious during the 1930s (154). Perhaps as a reactionary means of coping with the economic desolation of what was previously an amorphous cluster of ambitions by the Great Depression, Americans sought a crystalline narrative for why they were working. In this sense, an American Dream is particularly meaningful in its capacity to inspire hope and cruelly evanescent considering it lacks any tangible means of supporting oneself or one's family, let alone ascending to a higher economic plain or securing any of the material goods that denote success. Dream, too, speaks to the fantastical nature of such a concept, the utopian belief that there is some shared, unifying ideal that all Americans buy into and will passionately and loyally work toward. In its benevolent form, this desire to define a shared Americanism speaks to a desire to define an American cultural identity, something that could unify a fractured society. However, as Susman points out, the push to define an "American Way of Life" and an American Dream more often functioned as a "new kind of nationalism" that "could reinforce conformity" (164).

The nationalist bent of the American Dream is evident in James Truslow Adams' 1931 single-volume history of the United States, *The Epic of America*, a book that is generally considered the first to use the term "The American Dream." Adams defines the American Dream in terms that are attentive to the political moment. Rather than wed Americanism to materialism, a gesture that would have been met with resistance by the struggling masses of unemployed, Adams binds American democracy to individualism and self-determinism: "the *American dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. . . . It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable" (404). With few

exceptions, Adams' evocation of the American Dream twines hard work and industriousness to Americans' desires for a free and fair nation. Adams mythologizes America's greatness—politically, socially, culturally, economically—as a shared faith in freedom—capitalistic and democratic—above anything else.

Like so much American mythologizing, Adams grounds Americanness firmly in the frontiers of America's past and the settlers who came to colonize them.[47] Writing of the early settlers, Adams remarks that although nebulous, "The American dream was beginning to take form in the hearts of men. The economic motive was unquestionably powerful, often dominant, in the minds of those who took part in the great migration, but mixed with this was also frequently present the hope of a better and a freer life, a life in which a man might think as he would and develop as he willed" (31). Such a line of thinking, unsurprisingly, leads Adams to criticize the shifting political and social views of the 1930s that championed class consciousness and New Deal governance, which he saw as disrupting the harmony between economic classes.

In the concluding chapter of *The Epic of America*, Adams contemplates the communal rupture caused by the Great Depression, and wonders if the American Dream can survive the growing animosity between the various economic strata of American society. It is this moment more than any other that Adams believes will truly test the strength of Americans to defend the American Dream and prosper as a nation. Adams warns:

> if we are to have a rich and full life in which all are to share and play their parts, if the American dream is to be a reality, our communal, spiritual, and intellectual life must be distinctly higher than elsewhere, where classes and groups have their separate interests,

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[47] See my discussion of Elmer Rice's play, *The Adding Machine* (1923), in chapter two of my dissertation for more on America's infatuation with the frontier and westward expansion in relation to American greatness and democracy.

> habits, markets, arts, and lives. If the dream is not to prove possible of fulfillment, we might as well become stark realists, become once more class-conscious, and struggle as individuals or classes against one another. If it is to come true, those on top, financially, intellectually, or otherwise, have got to devote themselves to the "Great Society," and those who are below in the scale have got to strive to rise, not merely economically, but culturally. (411)

As Jim Cullen explains, Adams saw the Great Depression as the omen for an "uprising" in America born from a growing awareness of class divisions in the country. Unlike such moments of the past, this one would be enacted by "revolutionists" rather than "ordinary men" intent on overthrowing American democracy (Cullen 4). Thus, the "elsewhere" that Adams is referring is Europe in general and likely Russia specifically, where only a few years earlier the Bolshevik Revolution brought, through bloody conflict and much suffering, the overthrow of its monarchical government and the installment of communism. Fearful that America may regress into the "'Middle Ages'" of Russian communism, Adams implores American workers to look to themselves and not their politicians or business leaders to find fulfillment and success (416). Such assertions, while admonishing the rich for their part in creating the inequalities that led to the Great Depression, are undeniably directed at the growing labor movement in the country and stridently Capitalist in their championing of by-your-bootstraps "strive to rise" ascension.

At the same time, corporate America set out to bare its soul through various ad campaigns to "sell the 'American way of life' to the American people" (Marchand, *Creating* 203). As the Great Depression fomented anti-capitalist sentiment and public interest in unionization and socialist government programs grew, corporations made renewed efforts to cast themselves and laissez-faire capitalism within the narrative of American patriotism and

democracy. As one industrial leader lamented in a memorandum to members of the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) in 1933, "the problem" facing business in the 1930s was a lack of effective storytelling:

> The public does not understand industry, largely because industry itself has made no real effort to *tell its story*; to show the people of this country that our high living standards have risen almost altogether from the civilization which industrial activity has set up. On the other hand, selfish groups, including labor, the socialist-minded and the radical, have constantly and continuously misrepresented industry to the people, with the result that there is a general misinformation of our industrial economy, which is highly destructive in its effect. (qtd. in Tedlow 31; emphasis added)

The desire to "tell its story" led corporate America to organize a widespread propaganda (public relations) campaign aimed at rebranding itself as the bastion of American democracy in a country headed toward communist Armageddon. By 1936, NAM had expanded its advertising budget threefold "to counteract the pernicious influence of Franklin Roosevelt" (Marchand, *Creating* 203). Importantly, all these appeals to the public focused on perception, not reformation, with many of them invested in developing a clarity of meaning to the average American. Such campaigns, Richard S. Tedlow explains, assume that "there exists a harmony of interests in an economy characterized by free enterprise . . . and that the only cause for dissatisfaction is an inability to see this harmony, or as some of the more direct public relations men put it, 'economic illiteracy'" (31n19). Public relations firms suggested that "Big business should 'take its hair down' and stop using 'big words or abstract concepts.' It should adopt the language of the waitress and the truck driver; it should attain 'human interest' by paying less attention to the corporation's interests and more to the hopes, fears, and illusions of 'the great

masses of plain common folks'" (Marchand, *Creating* 211). In some cases, companies took this approach to the extreme, creating capitalism primers that included cartoons and infantilizing explanations of the difference between capitalism and socialism: "'This is a Cow. . . . The cow is the mother of capitalism' and 'Under private capitalism, the *Consumer*, the *Citizen*, is boss. . . . In state capitalism, the *Politician* is the boss. . . . He tells consumers what they can buy'" (qtd in Marchand, *Creating* 212). These efforts to sway public sentiment back toward the free market and humanize corporate America represent an oppositional propaganda campaign to the radical left that set out to unify Americans' conception of capitalism and democracy as interconnected systems, philosophies of living that necessitated each other to exist. This coterminous relationship allowed corporate America to simultaneously position its cause as the cause of the American people and alienate radical politics as an invasive (foreign) logic. Reflective of the Red Scare effort to delegitimize radical political groups like the IWW in the 1920s, corporations and conservative US government officials could again drum up paranoia concerning the burgeoning radical movement through comparison to the National Socialist German Workers', or Nazi Party. Robert Cantwell, growing up in the state of Washington in the 1920s, both lived through the economic instability of the lumber industry's boom and bust cycle—a microcosm of Depression-era America—and bore witness to worker activism and the violence and misinformation used to repress it. These early conflicts exposed Cantwell to business' power to distort labor unrest into jingoistic narratives of American capitalism under siege from foreign communist invaders. In this sense, Cantwell's youth is a premonition of what was to come in the 1930s.

"Listen to Me": Cantwell's Early Life in the Northwest and His Short Fiction

When Cantwell was eight years old, the Northwest became a hotspot for violent clashes between pro-capitalist groups and a radical labor organization that would become a national scapegoat for anti-labor violence throughout the 1920s: the Industrial Workers of the World (the IWW or Wobblies, for short). The conflicts in Washington began in 1916 with an IWW membership drive in Everett where five IWW members were killed by police and vigilante gunfire. During this time, Washington newspapers closely followed clashes between anti-labor groups and the IWW and frequently portrayed the actions of the anti-labor groups as patriotic and peaceful resistance (Seyersted 8-9). In 1917, when an IWW membership hall opened in Centralia, a parade of National Guardsmen headed by the chief of police and the mayor attacked the hall, destroying property and illegally arresting IWW members. The *Centralia Chronicle* recounted the event as orderly and peaceful. Nevertheless, these reports often included explicit threats to workers sympathetic to the IWW, evidenced by a 1915 declaration by the *Centralia Daily Hub* warning workers that "Centralia won't stand for IWWism" (9). However, it was in 1919 that Centralia and the IWW became national news after a violent exchange between Wobblies and members of the newly formed American Legion resulted in four Legionnaires dead and one Wobbly, Wesley Everest, lynched in retaliation. The Centralia Massacre, as it was later called, proved to be one of the major events to kickstart the 1920s "Red Scare" that fueled national efforts to suppress communist and socialist organizations, along with most union and strike activity, across the country. Working for the newspapers while living in nearby Chehalis when the Centralia Massacre occurred, Cantwell was exposed to the newspapers' and business organizations' anti-labor rhetoric, and its power to alienate workers from their communities.

Cantwell recounts these experiences in a 1935 short story titled "Hills Around Centralia." Composed 16 years after the event, at the peak of Cantwell's literary and philosophical energies,

the story certainly reflects Cantwell's mature ideology; however, it also underscores the lingering impact of these early encounters with labor activism on Cantwell's proletarian worldview.[48] Cantwell fictionalizes the Centralia Massacre to interrogate the ways perspective changes who the heroes and villains are in the story, which is reflected in the split narrative style of the story. The first section follows Kelly Hanrahan, a schoolboy living in the fictional town of Paradise, in the wake of the Centralia Massacre. This section explores Kelly's ambivalent feelings about his town's tempestuous response to the news, while he participates in efforts to destroy IWW handbills that mysteriously appear across the town. The latter section shifts to two Wobblies, Bert and an unnamed "old soapboxer," who fled Centralia in search of a friendly lumber camp in which to hide. Participating in a boy scout "hunt" for Wobblies, Kelly and a friend stumble upon Bert and the soapboxer and are briefly held hostage as the two men try to convince the boys that the official narrative misrepresents what happened in Centralia. The story concludes without catharsis, as the men leave the boys to climb further into the woods to hide. Unlike Cantwell's other protagonists, such as Johnny Hagen in *The Land of Plenty* or William McArdle in *Laugh and Lie Down* (1931), Kelly remains ideologically indeterminate throughout the story. Although this may be in part a result of the medium's brevity, it also articulates Cantwell's recognition that overwriting the nationalist programming that underpins the American work narrative is a challenging process. Kelly's unfulfilled epiphany comes as the result of the axiomatic power of the American labor narrative, especially as formed alongside participation in

[48] In an interview with Per Seyersted, Cantwell's children recount their father speaking to them about the events in Centralia: "it was clear to them that it had 'made a horrific impression upon him.'" Seyersted also calls attention to the epigraph Cantwell uses in the story, which came from a 1922 IWW pamphlet, speculating that the quote likely came from Cantwell's personal copy. "As this booklet surely was very rare by then," Seyersted posits, "it is highly likely that he had got hold of a copy when it appeared (he was then fourteen), and kept it with him" (12).

nationalistic social customs. Cantwell draws a direct connection between the patriotic rituals of American life and Americans' predisposition to the nationalist rhetoric of anti-labor propaganda.

Cantwell articulates this by highlighting the way the patriotic rituals of public-school prime Kelly to accept the principal's version of events in Centralia. Cantwell demonstrates how Kelly's perfunctory obedience to school customs is molded into a deeper emotional connection to tribalistic nationalism. Called to assembly to discuss what happened in Centralia, Kelly and the other children march like soldiers to "The Stars and Stripes Forever," and when they arrive in the auditorium, they pledge allegiance to the flag using the Bellamy salute before the principal begins, in a "grave and shaken" voice, to recount the tragedy of "four brave men . . . shot down by traitors in their own country" while marching peacefully "to do honor to . . . their comrades in arms, who had died in the War" (41).[49] Neither the march, the pledge, nor the principal's speech inherently elicit patriotic feeling in Kelly. Rather, the excitement Kelly derives from these customs stems from the communal spirit that they invoke. As he marches, Kelly merely keeps time to the tempo of the song until the surging of the classes "up the aisles together" evokes a trembling excitement, and the pledge is only an obedient recitation to a "lifeless" flag until he and his classmates' murmurous voices coalesce into a united cry (40). The fascist tone of the assembly is amplified in a momentary pause before the pledge begins, when Kelly hears the sounds of a factory in the distance. This loaded pause draws work and nationalism into one ambiguous moment where the "steady drumming of the sawmill and . . . the shrill haulback whistle from the logging engines in the woods" throb through the school's recitation of the

[49] At the time of Cantwell's writing, the Bellamy salute was gaining attention in America for its similarity to the Nazi salute (Ellis 113). This salute was common, if contentious, in America until 1942 when Congress changed the pledge to the one now used to forestall Germany from manipulating imagery of Americans saluting the flag for Nazi propaganda. Although at the time the story is set, 1919, the pledge would not have been unique, Cantwell's choice to specify the pledge in 1935 seems an intentional comparison between American and German nationalism. For a full account of the change in America's flag salute, see Richard J. Ellis' "Making the Pledge Safe for Democracy" in his monograph *To the Flag: The Unlikely History of the Pledge of Allegiance* (2005).

pledge of allegiance like a piece of propaganda (40). The confluence of the pledge and sounds of work simultaneously reinforces the nationalist message of the obedient, industrious *American* worker serving his country and articulates a sense of unease in Kelly at the suggestion that work and nationalism are intrinsically, even inextricably, related. Such a representation of these patriotic rituals undercuts nationalist assumptions about patriotism's self-evidence by depicting the patriotic feeling as a byproduct of desires for communal belonging. While acknowledging the power of these rituals to cultivate patriotic fervor, Cantwell is also positing their artificiality.

Cantwell represents this through Kelly's indeterminate emotional response to and perfunctory recitation of his patriotic duties. Hearing the school principal's skewed recounting of the American Legionnaires killed by the "traitorous unamerican" IWW members, Kelly feels an admixture of both terror and pride (41-42); and, as he sings the pledge of allegiance, he is overwhelmed by a "strange and half-painful excitement" that nevertheless swells him with a "strong, exultant pride" (40). While these abstract expressions of patriotism stir Kelly, he shows little devotion as he helps to collect and burn the Wobbly, or as the town calls them "progerman" (pro-German), pamphlets. Similarly, when asked by an old logger why he does not have any copies of the *Union Record*, Kelly firmly asserts that he only peddles "American papers" (44). Kelly fails to recognize that the absence of the *Union Record* has little to do with his patriotic consciousness and more to do with the fact that the newspaper distributors do not provide him with any to deliver. While Kelly is given an additional twenty-five copies of the more mainstream *Tacoma Tribune* and *Seattle Star*, he receives no copies of the *Union Record*, creating the appearance of anti-union and anti-Wobbly sentiment in the town. Kelly's misrepresentation serves as an important example of Cantwell's larger anxieties about the

waning voice of the laborer and industry's power to weaponize and deploy the nationalist labor narrative to villainize the IWW and foment distrust amongst workers.

A conscious fear of the worker's capacity to resist the company's misinformation fuels much of the discourse in the second half of the story, as the Wobblies discuss how they should navigate Paradise and the surrounding woods to avoid capture. While Bert believes that the Wobblies still have allies in the workers of Paradise, the old soapboxer insists they are all part of "The Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen" who have surrendered to the bosses' narrative of events (47). At the core of their differences over the general state of the working class is the measure of each man's faith in the workers to resist the machinations of the lumber companies and years of indoctrination on the part of American civic institutions. However, Cantwell refuses to posit a definitive statement on the issue; rather, he uses the two men to philosophize, setting Bert's idealism against the soapboxer's cynicism, establishing a generational binary between the two men that aims to undercut the reductive assertions made within proletarian literature. Bert naively believes that there is an inherent goodness in the workers, born from their class position, and even suggests that their complacency is an indicator of their friendliness: "They can't make these company towns without making the people friendly. They can't make them live in them houses without making them friendly. They can't make them pay double for everything without making them friendly. . . . They won't do anything or they'll be friendly" (49). While Bert believes that somebody in the town must still stand with the Wobblies, an assertion that will have a bittersweet resolution by story's end, the soapboxer is adamant that the townspeople are lost to the narrative created by the company. Responding to Bert's insistence that there must be somebody in the town friendly to the Wobblies, the soapboxer replies, "The people don't know, Bert. How can they know? Who will tell them?" (49). Living in a town constructed by the

company, reality will always be filtered through its perception of it. In this sense, the town represents a microcosm of America, a nation, as James Truslow Adams' history suggests, that was defined by its capitalist spirit.

The soapboxer's assumption is proven right when he and Bert encounter Kelly and his friend Paul, who have been let out of school along with the other Boy Scouts of the town to search the woods for the Wobblies. Interestingly, this encounter evokes an inversion of mood between the two Wobblies, as the reality of the situation in the town sets Bert adrift while the soapboxer gathers his senses and attempts to set the record straight. This realization rattles Bert, who sees in the two boys an omen of the hatred that lies in wait for them in the town. The image of young boys tasked with rooting out supposed political dissidents is too much for him to handle: "They made it a holiday. . . . Yes, and all over the state and all over the country the kids would get a holiday and run out in the schoolyards hollering and yelling while [Wesley Everest's] body floated in the Chehalis and the dogs ran loose in the streets. You can go home now, he thought. The wobblies are dead" (53). Again, it is clear that Cantwell is drawing from the imagery of Nazi youth organizations in this scene to evoke the patriotic sheen that belies the authoritarian terror of the Red Scare moment. However, the soapboxer takes this unexpected encounter as a final opportunity to present the Wobblies' side of the story. In a tired voice, the old man declares to the boys, "you boys don't know why you're here. You don't know why you're against us. You don't know what happened" (54). While the soapboxer's narrative is characteristically aligned with the Wobblies' message of pro-worker unity, it does not shy away from the violence that the Wobblies enacted on the legionnaires that attacked their headquarters. And much like the workers' recitation of "he'll say it anyway" in *The Land of Plenty* regarding Carl's manipulation of the story, the soapboxer pleads like a chant throughout his retelling of

events to the boys, “listen to me” and “did they tell you that?” (54); a prayer of self-manifestation uttered in the hope that his story will penetrate the hearts of the boys and make them see him.

Seeing the boys flinching in their fear and misery, Bert realizes that the problem they face is more than simple antagonism, it is the malaise of daily drudgery that batters down on the spirits of the people who live in the town: “The people were not friendly or unfriendly,” Bert reflects, “but confused and afraid” (55). Realizing that the soapboxer’s story will do little to penetrate the boys’ fear in this moment, Bert pulls the old man away so that they can flee further into the woods for the night. However, before leaving, the two Wobblies hold a chilling conversation about what they should do with the boys. Knowing that the boys will tell the town what happened, they lay out their options for escape: let them go, kidnap them, or murder them. Before the conversation moves too far along, Bert surmises that such inhumane thinking reflects a capitalist conception of life as a cost/risk analysis. “No,” Bert protests, smiling into the darkness, “it’s what they’d do” (56). With that decided, the two men depart. It is here that Cantwell draws upon an evocative motif that will be central to *The Land of Plenty*. Scrambling up into the dense woods around Paradise, the two Wobblies rest for the night, looking down upon the town, as “night closed around them, dense and heavy as the brush itself, until there was nothing left of the world but the damp tangle of vines and stalks that trapped and held them” (57). Like the outage that opens *The Land of Plenty*, the night that envelops Bert affords him pause to reflect upon his cause and the unknown individual who scattered Wobbly handbills throughout the town on the previous night. In the “darkness without boundaries,” the world opens to Bert and invites him to imagine the potentiality of even a single voice striving to illuminate the truth. The thought “was warm and reassuring. . . . it was like a light in the window

of some friend's house, seen and then lost again in the middle of a rainy and miserable night" (57). In this moment of pause, Bert's mind is free to imagine in a way that was inconceivable before. The effort to survive demanded his full attention, necessitating an "objective," calculating, and selfish decisiveness that compelled him to assess risk in the same cold manner as a business. In this sense, the darkness represents an awakening, or a break in capitalist living, that affords space for the worker to express him- or herself earnestly. This interplay between lightness and dark will be crucial not only to Cantwell's conceptualization of narrative heteronomy in *The Land of Plenty* but also to Cantwell's larger philosophical claims that his novel and proletarian literature in general represented propaganda intended to illuminate reality for its reader.

"No Landmarks": The Problem of Propaganda and Proletarian fiction of the 1930s

Cantwell, in stating that his novel is a work of propaganda, stands apart from many proletarian novelists and critics of his era, as the term was largely used derogatorily both within and outside of leftist literary circles to describe literature that was seen to sacrifice its aesthetic sophistication and literary value by mouthing ideology to its reader. The trouble generally with any discussion of proletarian literature is that its meaning to those who believed themselves writers of proletarian fiction failed to find consensus on what exactly proletarian literature set out to do. Indeed, Barbra Foley assigns an entire chapter of *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (1993) to parsing the divergent beliefs about what could be called proletarian literature and who could be understood as proletarian authors. Foley is kind enough to define in the Preface to her book a rather succinct definition: "the term 'U.S. proletarian fiction' refers to novels written in the ambience of the Communist-led cultural

movement that arose and developed in the United States in the context of the Great Depression" (vii). Furthermore, the authors of such novels, to differing degrees, "adhered to left-wing politics and viewed their work as contributing to the arousal of class consciousness" (vii). Foley surmises that there were roughly four criteria privileged amongst proletarian authors and critics to evaluate a texts proletarian-ness: authorship, audience, subject matter, and political perspective (87). Depending on who was asked and when, proletarian literature may be categorized as a letter written by a miner, a novel written by *or* for a miner, a novel about a miner, or a novel with a political message sympathetic to a miner.

Nevertheless, proletarian authors shied away from any assessment of their work that would categorize it as propaganda. While the *New Masses* adopted as its motto "art is a class weapon," and the consensus amongst literary radicals was that proletarian literature should promulgate revolutionary ideology and bring the masses to class consciousness, the majority of "commentators, critics, and novelists" who engaged with proletarian literature stood staunchly in opposition to "viewing proletarian literature as propagandistic in any of its distinctive rhetorical strategies" (Foley 130). As Barbara Foley explains, "while Marxist critics felt at ease in using the term 'propaganda' to describe any text's *class affiliation*," and believed adamantly that "there was no such thing as apolitical art or literature, . . . they had more difficulty reconciling themselves to the view that the term might denote literature characterized by *specific types of didactic maneuvers*" (132; emphasis added). Therefore, much proletarian literary discourse was devoted to actively combating accusations that proletarian literature was nothing more than political didacticism, which often meant championing realist literary standards that would

ultimately be used to justify claims that proletarian literature was nothing more than propaganda.[50]

Louis Adamic, in a 1934 article for *The Saturday Review of Literature*, minces no words in articulating the general opinion of proletarian literature when he declares, "*all proletarian literature is intended to be propaganda*" (qtd. in Bowman 110). This became the assertion that proletarian critics and writers consistently wrote against when articulating their philosophies of what makes good proletarian literature. To Adamic, and many critics, "proletarian literature" was nothing more than a medium through which to "publicize the proletariat, its plight under Capitalism, and indicate, directly or indirectly, how it will find its salvation in revolution" (110). In response to reductive criticisms, radical writers penned commentaries and rhetorical philosophies that unintentionally legitimated these negative assessments by insisting that any propagandistic qualities in a work represented the mark of an unrefined and undesirable kind of labor fiction. Wallace Phelps and Philip Rahv, in an extensive review of the state of proletarian literature, titled "Problems and Perspectives in Revolutionary Literature," for the *Partisan Review*, posit that such didactic literature is the result of untrained authors who lack the necessary experiential and ideological knowledge to effectively unify action and ideology into "*realistic* revolutionary themes" (4; emphasis added). It is these overzealous writers, Phelps and Rahv contend, who produce "schematically political" narratives that shout "verbal revolutionism" at their audience (6, 5). Phelps and Rahv believe that proletarian authors should strive to create realistic narratives that depict their subjects and ideologies in concrete imagery and action: "The question of creative method is primarily a question of the imaginative

[50] For a complete picture of the complicated discourse around propaganda in labor literature, see Barbara Foley's "Art or Propaganda?" and Walter Rideout's "'Art is a Class Weapon'" in their respective monographs. My discussion aims to present a representational snapshot of the general discourse on propaganda in labor literature of the 1930s and is by no means comprehensive.

assimilation of political content. . . . political content should not be isolated from the rest of experience but must be merged into the creation of *complete personalities* and the *perception of human relations* in their *physical* and *sensual* immediacy" (8; emphasis added). This focus on the merger of the ideological with the concrete and real, more than anything else, is an aesthetic principle that Phelps and Rahv believe should be used to measure the qualitative success of revolutionary literature.

Such an approach to proletarian criticism became the norm for most writers, as aesthetic values became indistinguishable from empiricist standards of literary effectiveness. As Foley and Walter Rideout make clear, this is the inevitable result of leftist writers striving for "strict verisimilitude" (Foley 111) by tapping into their "literary consciousness," which "firmly established realism as the dominant tendency in American fiction" (Rideout 208). "Subject matter comprised not only 'raw material' but fidelity to detail, especially with regard to work processes" (Foley 111). This realist, experience-centric commentary connected with radical critics because it seemed to align with their insistence on avoiding the self-indulgent stylization that produced "art for art's sake." For the leftist authors writing proletarian literature, art became a matter of objectivity; the acute ability to precisely articulate the goings on of a factory, shop floor, or work site. This theory of proletarian literature is crystallized into its purest and perhaps most unproductive form in Mike Gold's assertion that "there is no 'style'—there is only clarity, force, [and] truth in writing" ("Eagle or Horsefly?" 22). What exactly constitutes "clarity, force, truth" in writing is, ironically, never clearly defined in Gold's piece; however, Gold's resistance to abstract concepts like style is the obvious result of his view that such qualities of art stem from a bourgeois pontification of art that is ground in class privileges that do not align with proletarian literature. Turning away from Modernist experimentation of the 1920s, which was interpreted by

radical writers as “bourgeois, esoteric (hence, inaccessible to the workers), isolated (typically concerned about the author’s personal issues), and pessimistic or defeatist,” Gold championed “facts” as “the new poetry” of proletarian literature (Cohen 22; Gold, “Notes” 7). Ironically, as I point out in an earlier section, this was the same principle driving much ad copy and corporate messaging at the time: messaging needed to be geared toward the layperson and be conscientious of their tastes and intellectual limitations. As such, both express a kind of egoism based on an arrogant sense of superiority to the people they were trying to reach. The proletarian author, according to Gold, “does not need to theorize,” for “reality is more miraculous and romantic than all the inventions of the novelists and poets” (7). In this way, Gold puts forward the belief that through the empirical representation of workers’ objective lives and material struggles, the author will capture the ideological message of radical thinking.[51]

Cantwell unequivocally rejected proletarian fiction’s stringent devotion to documentarian style realism and Marxist political ideology as reductive and formulaic. Dogged adherence to these strictures, Cantwell contests, only succeeded in proliferating uncritical and formulaic stories “about the defeated strike as seen through the eyes of one of its more backward victims” that lacked any artistic or imaginative significance (“Return” 121; “Sign” 305). For Cantwell, the granular detail of proletarian fiction “atomized” the subject of investigation into a “mass of sharp impressions” that lacked “any artistic pattern” (“Town” 51). So preoccupied with rendering a taxonomy of space or place, the author became “overwhelmed and made incoherent by the unwritten, unrecognized novelty and richness which they see and sense” (51). Importantly, Cantwell’s criticism also identified the elitist quality of leftist criticism, which assumed that

[51] While such standards are the presumed result of Communist Party interference in American proletarian art, the truth is that American proletarian writers were often seen as far more dogmatic than their Russian counterparts. See Foley, p. 147. For a detailed account of how American proletarian literature was influenced and interpreted in Russia, see Eric Homberger.

working-class readers would be turned off by any novels that were too artistic in nature. In a reply to Louis Adamic's criticism that working-class readers did not in fact want to read intellectual literature, Cantwell presents a well-studied argument for working-class readers' refined reading preferences. The piece, titled "What the Working Class Read" (1935), gathers data collected by librarians on the types of books working-class readers checked out from the library to show that many working-class library goers were drawn to classic writers like Mark Twain and Thomas Hardy over the popular fiction that Adamic assumes they consumed. Based on these conclusions, Cantwell insists that the presumptions about workers unwillingness to engage refined literature was a condescending assumption based on the middle-class bias of the leftist critics who demand empiricism and simplicity over creativity and artistic expression. Cantwell was also aware that this focus on empiricism prevented authors from sufficiently rounding their characters, who Cantwell describes as "communist magicians" that "get involved in the most intricate and terrifying complications and then, when their troubles have reached a climax, they vanish from the novel, uttering revolutionary sentiments" (51). This impulse to craft characters as mouthpieces, Cantwell contests, comes from the ideological pressures put upon authors by critics "who stress the necessity of class-conscious fiction" over substantive fiction ("Class-Conscious" 606). Here Cantwell weaponizes the revolutionary phrase to criticize a preoccupation with giving "opinions on the nature of the struggle" and "comments about the strike" represented in novels rather than contribute any "aesthetic guidance so that the ideal may be brought to a more effective expression" (606). This reflects Cantwell's distaste for the revolutionary critic who is too concerned with producing "hair-splitting analyses of problems that nobody but the critic ever worries about" to provide "detailed and technical" criticism that

might aid the writer in producing imaginative fiction that progresses the revolutionary cause ("Author's" 27).

In contrast to the rigidly empiricist and slavishly political standards for evaluating proletarian fiction, Cantwell celebrates the imaginative power of the author to construct a cogent philosophy of proletarian literature. Through a critical reconsideration of Henry James and his fiction, Cantwell constructs a theoretical framework for proletarian literature that harmoniously unifies realist style with the Marxist conception of a revolutionary world. Cantwell grounds his theory in a reclamation of James from the cynical judgement that he was "a romantic and infatuated apologist for European aristocracy," arguing instead that James was a clandestine critic of the moneyed classes and the avarice that defined them ("Return" 119, 120). "Despite his social position," Cantwell assures his reader of James, "he never adjusted himself to the life of his class—unless you consider a lifelong war an adjustment. . . . he wrote of that class as corrupt, frivolous, remarkably avaricious and doomed" (120). Considering Cantwell's leftist politics this assessment of James makes sense—Cantwell must legitimize James as a politically appropriate role model for a proletarian author—but, more importantly, it serves a rhetorical purpose in articulating Cantwell's point of view on effective proletarian literature. Through Cantwell's reimagining, James becomes the ideal propagandist, like the mysterious pamphleteers of "Hills Around Centralia," who can infiltrate and comment on his subject inconspicuously. In arguing for James' proletarian spirit, Cantwell points to a fundamental misreading of James' work, which becomes the foundational aesthetic principles for Cantwell's conception of good propagandistic literature.

In the opening to "No Landmarks" (1933), the more robust of the two essays Cantwell wrote on James, Cantwell references an oft-cited passage in James' essay on Hawthorne that

criticizes America's lack of social and cultural history. In sketching out the rough "texture of American life" during Hawthorne's time, James provides a catalogue of America's deficits:

> No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic services, no country gentleman, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country houses, nor personages, nor thatched cottages, nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great universities, or public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class—no Epsom nor Ascot! (43)

This, Cantwell argues, irritates critics, who read James' passage as proof of his snobbishness and Anglomania. Cantwell argues that such readings misinterpret James as an acquiescent and envious writer eager to assimilate into the class of which he wrote. However, Cantwell objects to these assertions, arguing that such a reading perpetuates "a popular misconception of James' novels, one that seems to be firmly established on a lack of understanding of them and of *the circumstances that gave them their peculiar form*" (532; emphasis added). In focusing on the circumstances in which James wrote his novel, Cantwell reimagines James as a socially, if not class, conscious writer whose emphasis on the psychological workings of his characters served to counteract the instability of a world built on rampant "speculative 'growth'" (532). Cantwell interprets James' list as an expression of acute sensitivity to and revulsion towards the rapid social changes and upheavals that made America an unstable and potentially evanescent country: As Cantwell points out, James bore witness to "a prolonged economic crisis and through a period of intense social antagonisms—antagonisms which took the form of sectional disputes, uprisings and insurrections, and which reach their climax in a violent and protracted revolution" (532). A description of the late nineteenth century that echoes the tumult of depression-era America. This

parallel is reinforced by Cantwell's emphasis on the disruptive effect of capitalism on the nineteenth-century American social order, writing that "industrialism was rapidly changing the character of the country and the way of living of most of its inhabitants. . . . business was reaching more directly into more kinds of activity, and possessed more power over the community, for the business men who were the agents of change were unrestrained by tradition" (532).[52] As a result, "there were no social symbols generally accepted or widely agreed upon in America" on which to ground one's writing (531). While it seems absurd to assume that it was a lack of tradition that let unfettered capitalism run unchecked, there is no denying the evocativeness of Cantwell's description of James' America, which could just as easily be applied to the America of the 1930s. Such a characterization allows Cantwell to categorize James as an American writer who, like the proletarian writers of the 1930s, was disillusioned by the rampant economic corruption of his time and justifies the need for a return to a Jamesian aesthetic to challenge the instabilities and corruptions of the 1930s. If, like in James' nineteenth-century America, 1930s America is in such disarray that it possesses no cultural, moral, or political landmarks to adequately orient any critique of American labor in terms of detail or ideology, then the best way to comment on American work culture is through characters' perceptions of it.

Cantwell champions the adoption of Jamesian psychological realism to produce an affective prose grounded in the perceptional reality of the characters ("No Landmarks" 533). To explain this, Cantwell turns to James' preface to *The Awkward Age* (1899), in which he

[52] While Cantwell's assessment of James is certainly shaded by his political ideology, it is by no means an outright misrepresentation. More recent scholars have noted James' anxiety toward America's strident belief in Capitalism. Peter Collister, in his analysis of James' return to America in 1904, remarks that the author was overwhelmed by the country's "strident dedication to commerce and business" (14), which, as Selma Mokrani Barkaoui notes, James perceived as the result of "America's uncontrolled rush into modernity" (22). This headlong rush, in James' eyes, resulted in a "defacement of all aspects of American life" through "the endless mutations which made his country 'perpetually provisional'" (Barkaoui 22).

articulates his process for developing the structure of his novels. James describes drawing on a sheet of paper “the neat figure of a circle consisting of a number of small round objects deposed at equal distance about a central object”:

> The central object was my situation, my subject in itself, to which the thing would owe its title, and the small rounds represented so many distinct lamps, as I liked to call them, the function off each of which would be to light, with all due intensity, one of its aspects . . . each of my “lamps” would be the light of a single “social occasion” in the history and intercourse of the characters concerned, and would bring out to the full the latent colour of the scene in question and cause it to illustrate, to the last drop, its bearing on my theme. (xvi-xvii)

In sketching James’ narrative blueprint, Cantwell replaces the “social occasions” of James’ aristocratic settings with workplace incidents, which are then perceived through the various characters of the novel, as *The Land of Plenty*’s character-centric chapter structure makes evident. Through the light cast by his lamps, Cantwell illuminates his subject and articulates his critique. Less interested in the rigid facts of an event or a political situation, which seem to accomplish little in persuading people to question their place in a capitalist society, Cantwell wishes to unpack the messy psychology of Americans’ allegiance to the doctrine of capitalism through interpretations of how characters light the object of investigation. For Cantwell, a richer truth can be found in the varied shadings of the subject, darkening and lightening as the lamps cast their light across its surfaces. Such an approach allows Cantwell to transcend the ethical reductivity of the good/evil binary and aesthetic rudimentary that plagued so much proletarian fiction and codify a literary style that is distinctly proletarian.

Cantwell's conceptualization of proletarian literature weds his aesthetic principles to his Marxist ideology to create a literature that prizes form and characters rather than journalistic realism or political fidelity. Cantwell uses his perceptional model to critique American capitalism through an interrogation of each characters' capacity to grow class consciousness, which he describes as a "game of blind man's buff, with the characters growing 'warm' as they approached this moment of realization and 'cold' as they drew away from it" ("No Landmarks" 536). As a character moves from the egocentrism of Capitalism toward the communalism of Marxism, their power to illuminate the subject of the novel intensifies, making them more aware of the situation they are in and their impact on it. The divergent results of this model are represented in *The Land of Plenty* through Johnny and Walt, who embody the political polarities of Cantwell's model. Both characters begin the novel in a relatively similar self-conscious position, desirous of the materialism and renown attributed to the aspirational dreams promised by capitalism and eager to ascend the social ladder to escape the perceived indignity of the working class. However, as Johnny and Walt bear witness to the injustices enacted against the workers in the factory, Johnny grows more perceptive of the outside forces that instill these inadequacies on the working class while Walt retains his self-centeredness and allies himself with Carl and the company. This allows the micropolitical situation represented in the fiction to stand for the macropolitical issues of the country. This theorizing provides a clear context for Cantwell's assertions about the propagandistic power of *The Land of Plenty*, as it privileges fiction's capacity to "brood over the essential relationships" between people within, and "unearth deeper implications" of continuing down the path made by, a capitalist society ("Return" 120). In this way, Cantwell's novel produces a truth through its fictionality, a kind of propagandism that troubles anti-labor accusations against proletarian literature.

"Suddenly the Lights Went Out": Corporate Power and Narrative Heteronomy

Evocatively, Cantwell chooses to extinguish the lamps of narrative illumination in the opening to *The Land of Plenty*, creating an information blackout via the power outage that brings the mill to a standstill. "Suddenly the lights went out" and the reader is plunged into a narrative blackness. In doing this, Cantwell commits an obvious sin of proletarian literary realism: by darkening the narrative space and stopping the work in the shop, Cantwell has limited his capacity to record the details of the factory and the hardships of the workers as they work. However, importantly for Cantwell, the darkness provides an opportunity to illuminate the more troubling issues plaguing American workers. This darkness proves a disorienting and effective means of representing the narrative power imbalance at play in so-called official accounts of labor unrest, especially as one considers its juxtaposition with the section's title, "Power and Light." Told from the perspective of the efficiency-expert-turned-night-shift-foreman, Carl Belcher, the reader is given "no warning fading or flickering of the bulbs" before the "swift blotting out of the visible world" consumes their narrative vision (3). As a result, the reader is forced to rely on Carl as an anchor for their precarious textual footing. He is the only concrete, and therefore authoritative, figure we have. While readers who are ideologically aligned with Cantwell may immediately identify Carl, through his job title, as an antagonistic figure, it is important to recognize the intentional obfuscation of opening the novel with Carl in the lead. As a rhetorical choice, beginning from Carl's perspective affords him a temporary authority over the text to establish reader expectations. Although the darkness will ultimately undermine Carl's authority, functioning, as T.V. Reed argues, to articulate Cantwell's Marxian worldview that "the power failure of capitalism" must "be set aright . . . by the workers," it initially grants Carl, as

the representative of the management class, the narrative authority to shape the reader's understanding of the mill, which he depicts as dangerous and malevolent, and the workers, who he perceives as lazy and degenerate (68). As such, "Power and Light" serves a dual function of defining the management's power to cast the working class in an unflattering light, or to merely erase them in shadow.

Such power is wielded by Carl as a tool of rhetorical obfuscation and erasure, allowing him to impress upon the reader misperceptions about the workers as authoritative facts without any need for evidence to support them. The darkness becomes, quite literally, a blank slate upon which Carl can project whatever he wishes upon the workers, dematerializing and rematerializing them as he sees fit. This is reinforced by the novel's use of free indirect discourse, which gives narrative agency to the characters, in this case Carl, to orient the narrative lens. This serves, in the opening chapter, to render the workers, at most, as disembodied voices, at times merely "the darkness" that taunts him and eavesdrops on his conversations with his assistant Morley (12, 14). Unable to see the workers, readers must rely on Carl's interpretations, which are consistently unflattering. Carl imagines the workers "stretched out flat on their cans," or "sneaking outside . . . to chew the rag while he took the responsibility" for the outage. For Carl, the silence of inactivity rings with a sickening "irresponsibility" that suggests to the reader that Carl is cursed by undisciplined and indolent employees (12-13). When workers are given opportunities to speak, they are reduced to a primal hollering that reinforces Carl's primitivist representation of them. As the machines shut down and silence falls over the factory, Carl hears the workers' "voices . . . bubble up in the darkness, faint and wordless at first, growing to a slight shuffle of release" and culminating in an ecstatic "Yahoo! Yahoo!" (4). Describing the workers' voices as something pre-verbal and animalistic, a kind of industrial susurration, dehumanizes the

workers and configures them as a potentially dangerous other. Additionally, the celebratory warbles filtered through Carl's assumptions about the workers, presents them as apathetic toward their duties compared to Carl, who takes the completion of the work order deadly serious. Such aural imaginings reinforce the stereotype of the lazy and scheming employee, looking for any opportunity to avoid work at the manager's expense. This is heightened when Carl tries to maintain order in the shop and is met with phantasmic insults hurled at him from the darkness. One worker, hidden in darkness, shouts, "You kiss my ass!" (27). The jeer, couched in the hostile atmosphere of Carl's imagination, becomes indicative of an inherent insubordination that Carl must actively gird himself against and wrestle into obedience day after day.

This successfully destabilizes the boundary between the real and the abstract to the point that the workers fall into the precarious position of existential indeterminacy. The resulting inscrutability enabled by such dehumanizing formulations of the workers makes them a tabula rasa upon which the various ideological prejudices can be inscribed. For Cantwell, this is presented in nationalistic terms through the ethnic ambiguation of the workers. When Carl attempts to skirt responsibility for pulling the kiln fires, as the heat in the mill threatens to trigger the sprinkler system, he speaks to the Finnish kiln assistant Waino in pidgin English, explaining "No can tell. No *sabe*" (60). Aside from the audacious presumption that Waino—who has spoken to Carl in fluent, if rushed, English up to this point—cannot understand Carl, Carl's use of the Spanish *sabe* characterizes Waino as a culturally indistinct other who lacks the necessary faculties to properly follow orders. And when Waino, at the behest of Mike the kiln operator and Hagen, tells Carl that Mike will pull the fires if Carl does not decide, Carl laments: "That Polack . . . How do those fellows get in here? Why do they turn over all the dumb ones to the night shift?" (62). While it is unclear whether Carl is directing his racist ire at Waino, which would

represent a redoubling of Carl's ethnic mischaracterization, or Mike, the ambiguity of his assertion perpetuates the nativist assumption that all other cultural groups are uniformly inferior. Carl's racist assertions are echoed by Walt, the petty-bourgeois college student, who decries the "bunch of Polacks" that work in the factory (107). "They're all Polacks," Walt exclaims to Johnny, "they beef all the time. You can't depend on them. All these foreigners try to take advantage of you. If you don't stand up for your rights—Jesus, you're done for" (106).[53] Considering Walt is unlikely to complete his college education due to economic hardships resulting from his father's unemployment, these grievances read as Walt's attempts to salvage his self-respect. Like Carl, Walt considers himself superior to the workers in the mill and uses compulsive foreignization to set himself apart from them. Although, in isolation, these slippages and generalizations appear to merely reproduce the casual racism of American culture, collectively they constitute a network of othering that reinscribes systemic problems as resulting from outside (re: foreign) agitation. The broader implications of Carl and Walt's ignorance manifest in the social ripples of such xenophobia. Gerald, Johnny's sister Mildred's husband, rants to the Hagen family that his foundered career in Santa Barbara is the result of a Jewish incursion. "The Jews ruined Santa Barbara," Gerald insists, "they got control of all the banks and they got control of all the newspapers and . . . all the movies" (245). Like Walt, Gerald sublimates his personal insecurities and emasculation into a narrative of foreign corruption. Parroting lies perpetuated by the international Jewish conspiracy and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, Gerald attempts to justify the systemic instabilities of American capitalism by feeding into nativist anxieties around an imagined national incursion, especially in the form of a

[53] Although Cantwell, to my knowledge, never makes any direct reference to the antisemitic myth of Jewish Bolshevism, his use of Polish and Jewish ethnic slurs in the novel suggests that he was drawing parallels between America's fervent patriotism and Germany's growing fascism. This reading is bolstered by the themes of "Hills Around Centralia," discussed earlier in the chapter.

Communist insurrection against American Democracy.[54] Once these issues of labor equality have been exaggerated to the scale of a crisis of national sovereignty, public sympathy quickly turns in favor of the corporation.

Importantly, what Carl chooses to concretize in exact detail is the time and money lost to the outage. The capitalist programming that Carl has internalized bleeds into and disrupts the text to become, as Simon Cooper describes it, a "formal extrusion" that destabilizes the boundaries between the real workers and the abstract profits and expenditures of the mill. (130). Thus, the reader is given the figures rather than the human element that they have come to represent:

> Three hundred and fifty men at sixty cents an hour, cent a minute, three dollars and fifty cents a minute. Five minutes = 5 x 0 = 0, 5 x 5 = 25, carry two, 5 x 3 = 15 +2 = 17—$17.50. Jesus Christ. Half an hour: 6 x 17.50: 6 x 0 = 0, 6 x 5 = 30, 00; 6 x 7 = 42 + 3 = 45; 6 x 1 = 6 + 4 = 10. $105.00. Thrown away. (Cantwell, *Land* 13)

Through Carl's equation, the workers become integers in a larger problem of arithmetic, the unfeeling digits of efficiency, and the text becomes deformed by the symbolic. Alternatively, through Carl's narration and insertion of numerals, the symbolic becomes more real and tangible than the workers themselves, who are atomized in darkness. Through the language of logistics, all the workers become throw away objects in service of the mill's bottom line. Ironically, while the numbers disrupt the formal structure of the novel, they organize the complexity of industrial labor into a neat set of calculations. This both reinforces the importance of Carl's role in the mill,

[54] For much of the 1920s, Henry Ford exerted his massive influence over the United States to perpetuate the international Jewish conspiracy. From 1920 to 1922, Ford published antisemitic articles in *The Dearborn Independent*, a newspaper he owned, that drew extensively from *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. He later compiled these articles into a book, *The International Jew: The World's Foremost Problem*. In 1934, the same year that Cantwell published *The Land of Plenty*, an expanded version of *The Protocols* was published, while Father Charles Coughlin used his nationally broadcast radio program to spread conspiracies about Jewish involvement in the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, adding to the Jewish Bolshevik conspiracy that Jewish bankers funded the revolution and were to blame for the spread of Communism across the world.

making his experience as an efficiency expert vital to controlling the men, and reduces labor issues to matters of exchange. It is little surprise that Carl takes offense at Hagen's cold reception to his attempt to "put his cards on the table" and talk to Hagen "man to man" (15). Carl believes that mutual respect is a simple exchange of values, while Hagen treats it as an earned reward. What Carl, as the embodiment of market-driven capitalism, cannot recognize is that these equations, and his general focus on the capital at stake, are wholly abstract and intangible, especially compared to the workers who produce tangible goods. The numbers are the very definition of abstracted labor. However, by actualizing the expenditures as text on the page while disembodying the workers and relegating them to the dark margins of the text, Carl has successfully obfuscated the work narrative as a matter of corporate finance rather than a matter of worker humanity. The issue at hand, Carl's narrative extrusion would have the reader believe, is the economic, and not the human, cost of such a calamity. Carl's math neglects to account for the moral value of paying the workers for being on the job during a holiday weekend, considering the mill would have otherwise been closed for the fourth of July celebrations. Again, by shifting the focus to the fiscal troubles he will face in the future, Carl has successfully eluded any fault for having the factory open in the first place. The problem is not the essentially forced labor the workers must give to buoy the mill against the economic hardships brought on by a glutted lumber market, but the mills expenditure on workers who, by no fault of their own, are temporarily incapable of completing a rush order that was guaranteed under untenable conditions.

Cantwell captures the mortal stakes of this level of dissociation in the unnamed hoist man who has been pinned under a log because of the outage. This represents Carl's successful actualization of the systemic violence inflicted on the workers into real-world consequences.

Working alone in an isolated part of the mill bringing raw lumber into the factory for processing, the man is pinned under a log “six feet through and nine feet long” when the outage causes the motor to seize and the free-swinging log becomes a battering ram that pins the man against the foundations: “For a time it held him there, crushing through the brief defense he made against it, breaking through his arms, his clothing, the frail protection of his flesh. Then it settled back slightly, leaving him jammed against the piling” (7). The man, unnamed and unrecognizable even to the workers, brings the broader abstraction of the workers back into a corporeal form, but as a vessel entirely devoid of its humanity. Speaking both to the dehumanizing effects of modern industrial labor as well as the rapid rate of turnover in the mill, Winters fails to recall the hoist man: “He tried to remember who [he] was, or what he did, but he did not know him" (96-97). Even amongst the workers, identity is a hard thing to hold onto. Instead, all that remains is the “swollen and distended” log that has pinned the hoist man against the wall. Like Carl’s numbers, this image of the log overwriting the man trapped underneath erases the worker and replaces him with the product. Importantly, Cantwell ensures that the reader remains as detached from the suffering man as possible by removing any narrative opportunities for pathos. While one may reasonably expect a chapter, even a brief one, to inhabit the hoist man’s mind and observe his feelings and thoughts, either before or during his accident—especially when one considers that Cantwell includes a chapter titled “The Light Man” that recounts Hagen’s brief interaction with a debt collector for the power company—Cantwell never allows it. Additionally, when it is later revealed that the worker succumbed to his injuries and has died, his name is withheld and there is no indication that his story will be reported by the press. What is perhaps most distressing about the news of the man’s death is the revelation that his death adds to a running list of banal workplace fatalities.

The accident results in a cascade of discourse amongst the workers as they share stories about the dangerous working conditions they have experienced in the past. Several workers recount experience from various logging camps where they previously worked, the "highball camps" where managers "made a science" of jeopardizing workers' lives with faulty equipment and dangerous work conditions (252). While the stories shared are gruesome and tragic—one man recounts a young worker whose legs were amputated by the wheels of a train—the effusion of discourse points to Cantwell's solution to the problem. At the same time that Carl attempts to erase the workers and rewrite their work narrative, the men begin to lend voice to their own stories. If the outage benefits Carl's efforts to denigrate the workers and bolster his credibility for the reader, it also affords the workers a break in their work that activates their minds in a way that is otherwise repressed by the brutal tedium of their labor. In this sense, Cantwell performs a "mystical reversal of the customary meanings for dark and light," in Kenneth Burke's words, that presents the outage as the catalyst for introspection and change (59). In a profound reversal of the norm for proletarian fiction, Cantwell presents the work stoppage as a moment of existential exhalation that unburdens the workers of their work. While this will ultimately lead to a strike—the traditionally accepted abstention of work in the proletarian novel—Cantwell presents it as a freedom in and of itself. The outage is revelatory.

The burden of work is presented in the novel through Cantwell's distinction between the worker compared to the work. In accordance with proletarian protocol, Cantwell includes passages celebrating the mill workers' dexterity and skill. In the first Hagen chapter, before the outage, Hagen admires the sawyers' deft execution of their tasks as he watches them "feeding the panels swiftly into the rolls, never taking time to do more than glance from the loads of panels to the ones they shoved into the rolls, while at the other end of each machine the off-bearer lifted

them as they poured out, dropped them on the trucks in neat piles and reached up for another" (36). The efficiency and grace of the workers as they swiftly execute their labor speaks to the proletarian impetus to enshrine industrial work as an honorable and dignified profession, one that requires a honed set of skills and a lifetime of knowledge to do well. Such skill and precision become almost preternatural in the novel when the outage occurs, as the workers know instinctually how to manage their machines and move through the factory: "When the lights went out a hundred men moved to press the switches that stopped their motors, finding them at once in spite of the dark, moved without orders to cut the switches . . . A hundred men moved without orders, checking the thousands of dangers, the thousands of dangers no foreman could ever see, had ever heard of, could not even imagine" (49). The workers' intuition, Cantwell makes clear, is the product of their intimate relationship with their machines and years of cumulative experience they have doing the work, as opposed to Carl's theoretical and abstracted conception of work and worker output. Carl's fear is the workers' courage. "This type of knowledge," Scott explains, "is the result not of rational calculation on the part of the mill workers but of their concrete, lived experience on the shop floor, surrounded by an elaborate web of machines that have been carefully coordinated with one another. As such, no other forms of knowledge can substitute for this firsthand acquaintance with the sights and sounds of the factory" (207). And yet, Cantwell complicates his presentation of work by emphasizing the intellectual tradeoff for such competency: the suspension of higher thought necessary to maintain focus on the material processes of an over-clocked workspace.

In the same chapter that captures the workers' autonomous grace, Cantwell depicts the vacuousness of the workers as they speed through their work orders. The work, set at such a high speed by the demands of Carl's efficiency measures, becomes a barrier between the workers and

the world around and within them, a membrane that closes them off to each other and their own interior lives. This is captured in Cantwell's depiction of Winters as he works with Hagen's son Johnny to fulfill the rush order. Winters' humanity is directly correlated to the acceleration of his body as he runs the wood boards through the saw to Johnny's waiting hands. It only takes moments for Winters to become "lost to everything else in an effort to keep up with" the saw and the rapid speed set by Carl's efficiency standards:

> The effort to keep up with the racing saws drove everything else out of his mind: thought of his wife, who was dying, his concern because Hagen had misunderstood him and his desire to ease the work of his off-bearer; there was nothing left for him now but the straightedge against which he lined the panels and the rolls that drew them in. Gradually his features emptied of any life, only his swiftly moving hands and his intent eyes revealing the spirit in him. (39)

Presented as a series of oppressively rote actions that mechanize the workers as adroit automatons, work functions in the novel as a nullifying force that prevents the workers from contemplating their lives and their work conditions. Too distracted to "kick" against the mill's demands, the workers run on mindlessly, passing wood through their machines in a blur of light and sound that becomes as abstract as Carl's arithmetic. Similar to the initial incorporeality that powered Carl's opening chapter, Winters' work state represents an intellectual incorporeality. In this state of labor delirium, the workers embody what Michael Denning defines as the "proletarian grotesque": "gargoyles that violate accepted classifications, human heads on the bodies of birds"; or, in the case of industrial labor, human heads on the bodies of machines (123, 122). In their disembodiment, the workers become voices without mouths, bodies without presence, or sounds without thought. They are as much blurs on the periphery of one's vision as

the "stream of bright wood" that shuttles through the machines "from one truck to the other" (39). As such, they become mere extensions of their machines and, through this intimacy, retain only the barest level of communicability amongst each other through the interlocking network of the factory.

And yet, the workers' suspended consciousnesses also signal the nascent rumblings of a rupture in the normative state of corporeal labor. As Denning further iterates, "the grotesque is the poetic form most appropriate to moments of crisis and transition" (122). William Scott characterizes this as an "image of machine-consciousness [that] reflects the emergence of a new type of humanity" (207). Thus, Cantwell's characterization of the mass worker comes to symbolize a provocative inversion of mechanization that recognizes the interconnectivity of the shop floor as a vital engine of transgression. As a result, "the mechanization of an entire workforce," Scott explains, "is not an inherently oppressive phenomenon. That which in other novels served either to condemn or to glorify the process of mechanized dehumanization had now come . . . to signify a uniquely technological environment that enables workers' acts of resistance" (208). The potential empowerment that can be drawn from the machine factory resides in the nodal networking that the machines constitute, the systemization of the factory that creates a closed circuit of work processes, making even a localized cessation of work processes a system-wide shut down of the shop. Cantwell contrasts the workers' reclamation of voice with the symbolic death rattle of the mill as the machine sounds come to a halt. Using language of asphyxiation, Cantwell opposes the mill's mechanical vitality to the workers' awakening consciousness. As the saw teeth "choked against the wood" and the pipes clogged with sawdust, a pall of machine silence settles over the entire tide flat where the mill is located (39, 40). With the power out, the workers can no longer be measured by bodily output or capacity to produce,

and are instead characterized by their voice, by their expression of mind and thought, and by their humanity. The lapse in production frees the workers from the numbing monotony of their labor and opens up the potentiality for individual articulation, contemplation, and discourse.

It is this unity of knowledge that spurs the men on to resist Carl and demand MacMahon, the factory manager, reinstate Hagen and the others at the end of the night. MacMahon, largely a peripheral figure of the novel, comes to the factory after receiving word of the outage. MacMahon's marginal presence, residing on the fringes of the narrative lamp light of the novel, signals another narrative privilege for the ruling class. Although he oversees the entirety of the mill, he repeatedly tells the workers asking for his verdict on the matter of the firings, "I don't like to interfere in these things" (203). His power normally affords him distance from the more unpleasant aspects of work—hirings, firings, cost cutting—a benefit that allows him to remain morally faultless on these matters. Like Carl, he can deploy numerical objectivity when making decisions, a move that dehumanizes the workers and ensures that his narrative of events remains politically sterile. This is redoubled late in the novel when the mill owner, Digby, arrives to take control of the efforts to reopen the mill against the striking workers. However, on this night, because of the outage, MacMahon is forced to confront the men and speak to them on level ground. Unable to concede authority to Carl on the matter, MacMahon folds under the workers' pressure and reinstates everyone. Refusing MacMahon's offer to meet on his terms, in the official spaces of the management office, the men repeatedly ask, "well, . . . do they come back to work or not?" (203). Without any recourse, MacMahon concedes: "Yes, yes, let it go, forget about it!" (203). The close of part one sounds with a reiteration of the power shift represented by the men's voices rising over the machines. The whistle signaling the end of the workday gives "a weak, steam-saving blast" as "some of the kids began yelling as they ran toward the factory"

(203, 204). The workers leave the factory "proud" and "excited" over their momentary victory. "They had their first sure knowledge of their strength" (204). However, the celebration is short lived, as the workers learn that the official word of management is deceptively plastic and evanescent. On the next business day Carl reverses MacMahon's decision and fires a large swath of workers, setting off the walkout that starts the strike.

While this initially seems a jubilant revelation, a moment in which the workers will translate their newfound voices into action, it quickly becomes a new challenge for them to overcome as their actions are officially recorded by the press. As explained earlier in the chapter, the walkout is captured by the local newspaper as a tumultuous and unsettling moment of unrest. Before the workers have the opportunity to speak for themselves, even to their families, the report has already manifested the frame within which the story will be told. What is worse, for Johnny a joyful beginning full of "excitement and strength" represents a betrayal for his family, who sees his and his father's decision to strike as an act of treason. After returning home from a strike meeting shortly after the walkout, Johnny is confronted by his sister Mildred with the enigmatic accusation, "I suppose you're one of them!" (298). Initially confused by Mildred's behavior, Johnny attempts to defend himself and the workers against his sister's misrepresentation of events. Presented with the paper's reporting on the walkout, Johnny understands why his sister is upset: "There it was, the whole story, with everything just a little bit wrong" (299). The peaceful strike became a barbaric attack on the management office. Regardless of Johnny's insistence that the report is false, his sister and her husband have already made up their minds: "You don't even know what was going on" (300). The assertion establishes an unsettling conflict between Johnny and his family and signals the power of the press to sway opinion. Before hearing Johnny's side of the story, Mildred has already accepted the paper's

skewed representation of the walkout and excised her brother from the family unit. Now that he is *one of them*, Johnny becomes a figure of scorn and exclusion, an "other" that can be burdened with the larger economic problems that have forced his sisters and their husbands and children to return to their parents' home unemployed and ashamed. Like the broader anxieties concerning foreign workers that energize Carl and Walt's animosity toward other workers, revolutionary action for Johnny's family characterizes both a familial betrayal and an anti-American treason that is incompatible with their aspirational goals. What seems to be more painful to Johnny is the fact that his family assumes he is too naïve to see what actually happened at the walkout. While such an assumption on his family's part presumes his and his father's innocence—"they've put something over on him," Mildred's husband, Gerald, sympathizes—it also dismisses his grievances as mere illusions (300). For Johnny, this becomes a moment of existential crisis as he wonders if his own memory has deceived him. This view of Johnny and the other workers primes the community to reject any stories that come out of the strike that do not align with the press' accounting of events. Any dissonance between the real and the reported will be treated in like fashion and dismissed.

What is worse is that once the workers enter the spotlight of public revolt, Carl, MacMahon, and the newly arrived mill owner Digby fall back into the shadowy periphery. This inversion of visibility once again marks a shift in power, as the managerial elites become merely official sources for reports on the events of the strike and defenders of their private property. Because the workers are defying the norms of decorum, they are immediately recognized as aberrant forces in the community, both creating a state of unrest and defying the tenets of American democracy. To Johnny's dismay, this is largely the reason people come to observe the strike, not to support the strikers but to get a look the abominations they read about in the paper.

Johnny winces under the gaze of "the calm, inquisitive, well-dressed people who were attracted by the strange stories that appeared in the newspapers and who, believing these accounts in which people were shown as acting so abnormally, looked on the picket line as they might have looked upon some unknown submarine monster washed up on the tideflat" (306). It is ironic that the workers' resistance is coded as abnormal considering the recent holiday around which the events of the novel are set. Cantwell's decision to set the events of the novel around the Fourth of July reinforces the cruel irony of the workers' alienation from their community and the hypocrisy of the American insistence upon democratic order, especially regarding labor disputes. While the workers are performing an act of rebellion against an oppressive overlord—the same kind of revolution that the Fourth celebrates—they are undermined by their imposition on the sanctity of private property, the tentpole of capitalism. "The invisible boundary" of the mill's property line, as Johnny understands it, becomes a demarcation for tolerance toward the workers cause, with the police trained to enact violence if any workers step across it and the public inclined to turn against any workers who transgress that sacred boundary (302). This, once again, brings to light the carnivalesque nature of the strike, as Cooper defines it, as an "officially sanctioned upheaval," a temporary rupture that will be tolerated for only so long (Cooper 127). The men on the line, initially, treat the strike as a carnival, using the imagined line like a game of "dare-base" to try to dodge the police who chase them off the property (Cantwell, *Land* 302). While all appears jovial in the public—Johnny recounts that the police "handled [the workers] gently" while they were in sight of the spectators gathered around the mill—the men would return from the jail "terribly beaten" (303). Once the workers occupy the mill, the result of a misunderstanding between the workers and the police as the workers make a helter-skelter dash

for the mill to get out of a surprise downpour, visibility becomes hyper-inscribed on them, as their every action is criminalized and scrutinized.

While the occupation displays Cantwell's radical prescience regarding labor resistance soon to come in America, in the novel it represents a final silencing of the men that ensures their defeat. Once inside the mill, the workers return, or perhaps descend further, into a state of alienation from their community. Simultaneously hyper-visible in the public consciousness but physically obscured, the workers inadvertently reinscribe their initial state of evanescence from which Carl drew his narrative power at the novel's beginning. The scene is set in nightmarish parallel to the opening of the novel, with the lights once again shut off as the workers scramble to escape the police and hide inside the mill. This time, the outage is an intentional act by Hagen to disorient the police and provide the workers a cloak of darkness under which to escape (323). However, this willful act of rebellion is met with calamity, not focus. As the unity amongst the strikers unravels, they are again a dissonant collection of voices. Some of the workers want to leave in the hopes that they will be forgiven for their accidental trespassing, while others, like the former wobbly Vin Garl, consider this the ideal perch from which to make their demands. "They don't know what's happening," Vin Garl explains to the group:

> they don't know but what *every* mill is going to walk out. . . . I say, *now* let's talk business with them. Now we're in their God-damned factory. We busted their scab crew. We're here where we can stop them from trying to work a hell of a lot easier than we could stop them by walking back and forth on that God-damned picket line . . . *Now* let's go to Digby. We can tell him this, we got some cards to play now that we didn't have before. (349-50)

While, in a seemingly incomplete reading of the novel's ending, William Scott surmises this proposition as a demonstration of the workers' power to achieve change in the factory, it actually represents a false sense of importance, as Digby actively ignores the workers' efforts to communicate with him (Scott 216). Scott contends that "by sitting down at their machines and refusing to move, Cantwell's mill workers have voluntarily reduced themselves to the mute condition of the machines that they operate; yet they have done so, paradoxically, to make their voices heard in negotiations with management" (216). While this is true in the context of the night of the outage when MacMahon concedes to the workers' demands, it is a gross misinterpretation of the novel's ending. Something the workers are ill-prepared to face is the fact that Digby is not MacMahon, and he possesses none of the sympathy for the workers—little as it may be—that MacMahon does. Rather, Digby has already laid plans to overhaul the police force in the town to ensure such outbursts are quickly suppressed in the future and extends no olive branch in reconciling with his disgruntled employees. In this sense, the workers are made mute by Digby's disinterest, a sign of the minuteness of their actual bargaining power. This is clearly the faltering of Cantwell's imagination that he faults in the *New Masses* symposium for his defeatist ending ("Authors' Field Day" 27). The strike's demise is preceded by a complete breakdown in communication between the workers and the outside community. On the final day of the strike, when Hagen intends to meet with MacMahon and Digby to negotiate the end of the strike, he is met with an army of police and newsmen who join in the violent suppression of the workers (362). As the tideflat turns into a battlefield, Johnny senses that "there was no talk anywhere" as the workers fumble amongst the chaos trying to figure out what to do (361). The chaos is punctuated by a gunshot, which kills Hagen, ensuring the complete collapse of the strike, as a torrential rain drowns out the voice of the workers and washes away the remaining

hopes of revolution. Johnny, escaped to a secluded area of the flat with Vin Garl and a brutally beaten worker, reflects on how even the rain feels like a "new and terrible weapon of their enemies" (369). Under its heavy pour, the three survivors speak "with an effort" (368). There is really nothing left to say. Like Bert and the soapboxer in "Hills Around Centralia," Johnny and Vin Garl resign themselves to wait for the "darkness to come like a friend and set them free" (369). Surely, like the earlier report of the peaceful walkout that precipitated the strike, this skirmish will be presented as another example of worker violence against the sentinels of law and order.

Conclusion

Cantwell's admission, in his reply to Hicks' review, that he could not "imagine clearly what would happen" after the workers took control of the mill seemingly bodes ill for the future of worker activism, as it speaks to a larger conundrum that this dissertation grapples with throughout ("Authors' Field Day" 27). What does come after the revolt? As chapter one contests, few authors, if any, could see beyond the constructs of American capitalism to imagine a world in which it does not exist. Or, even to imagine a world in which capitalism and our relationship with work have changed radically enough to assuage their harmful effects. While my reading of *The Land of Plenty* contends that Cantwell's lapse in imagination reifies the despondence depicted by the total collapse of the workers' cause in the novel's conclusion, I think it important to recognize the fragile flame that remains in the glooming darkness: Johnny, as the young revolutionary educated in the cruelty of the labor system, remains an open-ended potentiality. As such, I choose not to mistake the "ending for closure," like Cooper, who recognizes "Cantwell's self-conscious direction in the final sentence of his novel, back to the beginning, to the moment

when ‘Suddenly the lights went out,’” which “suggests just how far his book is actually *about* rereading” (150). If, as I propose, Cantwell is concerned with the narrativity of the labor movement, then we must consider his novel as a metatextual piece of his thematic whole. This is evidenced by Johnny’s formation of critical reading skills during the strike that allow him to look past “the new stories they made up” in the papers into and “between the lines and understand what had actually happened” (301-02). By scrying the omissions, Johnny attunes himself to the “non-discursive elements of textual production” in what Cooper calls a “form of political praxis” that “extends awareness . . . beyond the confines of subjective experience” (Cooper 150). This seems to be Cantwell’s unstated optimism for the future—his faith “between the lines”—in which a next generation of writers and workers see beyond the limitations of Cantwell’s imagination as an exercise in interpreting his text. This hope, left adrift in the closing of *The Land of Plenty*, is recast in the next chapter in the writings of Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Wright. Ellison’s unnamed narrator of *Invisible Man* (1952) proposes a similar interpretive power in the preface to the novel, where he explains that his invisibility “gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. and you slip into the breaks and look around” (8). Like Johnny’s power to look between the lines, Ellison’s narrator learns to “slip into the breaks.” As Jessica Teague observes, Ellison’s narrator descends, “like Dante, into the depths of the music,” to reframe “Black history through the syncopated rhythms of the music” (24). This new mode of listening that allows him to look beyond the present into both the past *and* future, illuminates, like the 1,369 light bulbs that irradiate his underground home, a new vision of work that questions its very function in life. As I move into the next, and

final chapter of my dissertation, I will consider the ways Ellison, Hurston, and Wright contemplate a post-work imaginary that refuses to conform to the strictures of work.

Chapter Four: Living Underground and Working Down on the Muck: Escape from Work in the Novels of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Zora Neale Hurston

Early in Ralph Ellison's 1981 introduction to *Invisible Man* (1952), which chronicles the formation of the novel both materially and thematically from its genesis as relatively generic anti-war fiction in the vein of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farwell to Arms* (1929) to its final form as a canonical masterpiece of the inter-war era, Ellison includes a brief biographical sketch of his work habits and conditions while writing the novel to characterize "the economics, geography and sociology of the struggle sustained in writing the novel" (xi). Although this biography only constitutes four pages of Ellison's introduction, it provides an invaluable entry point into my discussion of Black workers in the twentieth century. As an unemployed, and as yet relatively unknown, Black writer whose work "came catch-as-catch-can" during the time he wrote *Invisible Man*, Ellison occupied a precarious place in his Black community, one that marked him as particularly conspicuous and mysterious to his neighbors (x). Absent the steady routine of regular employment, he became a "subject of speculation and a source of unease" to his Harlem neighbors, who mistook Ellison's "indefinite status" as proof of his extralegal occupation (ix). This tension came to the surface "one snowy afternoon" when a local "wino lady let me know exactly how I rated on her checklist of sundry types and characters": "Now that nigger *there* must be some kinda sweetback, 'cause while his wife has her some kinda little 'slave,' all I ever see *him* do is walk them damn dogs and shoot some damn pictures!" (ix). Not only does this neighbor's assumption about Ellison being a "sweetback" imply an effeminacy that Ellison was particularly defensive about, but it also evokes cultural assumptions about Black workers' indolence.[55]

[55] While a student at Tuskegee Institute, Ellison was "made furious" by Robert E. Park's assertion that Black Americans were "the lady among the races" (Rampersad 77). This, and other racist sociological claims that Black

According to Benjamin Kahan, the sweetback is best understood as "an economic category" that defines an unemployed Black man who is supported by a Black woman and denoted by his "good looks, flashy dress, and masculine display" (48). The sweetback is a contradictory figure within Black literature, especially during the Harlem Renaissance, because he articulates opposed conceptions of masculine identity: For some, the sweetback "is the epitome of the good life, and to occupy this position confirms one's sexual potency and material ease—a seeming masculine quintessence" that evokes aristocratic leisure (Maiwald 834). For others, the sweetback "is akin to a prostitute or associated with them" (Kahan 49). "Even when they are not considered prostitutes themselves," Kahan explains, "the sweetback's existence within the employ of women, with a 'woman-made' masculinity, marks his masculinity as standing outside hegemonic ideals" (49). Ellison articulates this paradoxical definition in his own description, remarking that the sweetback is "a man who lived off the earnings of a woman" with the "ruthless business enterprise of an out-and-out pimp" (ix-x).

Although Ellison insists that he was "less annoyed than amused" by the woman's cutting remarks, he concedes that this is largely because he was accosted while "returning home with fifty legally earned dollars" in his pocket from one of his "catch-as-catch-can" jobs. To dispel any illusions that he was a layabout spendthrift while composing his novel, Ellison presents his reader with an itemized list of all the work he performed while writing *Invisible Man*. In addition to writing a novel, Ellison explains, "I reviewed a few books, sold a few articles and short stories, did free-lance photography (including book-jacket portraits of Francis Steegmuller and

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Americans were innately humble, submissive, and forgiving, soured Ellison on sociology. Considering Ellison's outrage at Park's gendered classification, and his idolization of so-called masculine writers like Richard Wright and Ernest Hemingway, Ellison likely felt both derided and emasculated by his neighbor's assumption. For more on Ellison's gendered conception of culture, especially literature, see Clive Baldwin. For more on the sweetback, see Benjamin Kahan and Michael Maiwald.

Mary McCarthy), built audio amplifiers and installed high-fidelity sounds systems." All this in addition to the "savings from my work on ships" and "a Rosenwald grant," which symbolize Ellison's work ethic as both a blue-collar laborer and intellectual (x). I highlight Ellison's emphatic efforts to legitimize himself as an industrious member of his community not to criticize the author for abiding by the work narrative that demands such a demonstration of exertion, but to identify a unique problem for the Black worker in the twentieth century: the need to demonstrate one's worth as a productive member of society.

Display of this moral virtue, assumed inherent in white society, to toil endlessly demanded vigilance of Black Americans who were perennially characterized as both sturdy but innately lazy workers. Unsurprisingly, such imaginings of the African American worker spring from the hydra that is American slavery, which simultaneously insisted upon the industriousness and indolence of enslaved Africans. After emancipation, only the latter image of African Americans carried forward, with the "Negro problem," as it pertained to work, largely focused on assimilating Black workers that supposedly lacked the ability to survive in the world of white productivism. This manifested in representations of African Americans across "popular, journalistic, public policy, and academic analyses . . . as consumers rather than producers, as takers rather than givers, and as liabilities rather than assets" (Trotter xv). As a result, "blackness as 'problem'" came to mean that Black workers were "inherently inimical or at best incidental to the imperatives of modern American capitalism" (Lawrie 169). It is little surprise then that "economic inequality" between Black and white communities was largely understood as the result of "individual failings born of a poor work ethic, bad family values, and an embrace of dependency and irresponsibility . . . which were then habitually handed down over generations with the inevitable result of economic marginality for a disproportionate number" (Morgan 11).

As a culmination to the previous three chapters of my dissertation, this chapter will focus on three twentieth-century Black authors—Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison—and their critiques of the assimilationist thrust of nationalistic work culture. Considering the long history of Black Americans' fight against various iterations of enslavement, and thus their complicated relationship to work as both a representation of servitude and salvation, this chapter serves an important close to my discussion of the cruel optimism at play in the American work narrative. Focusing on Richard Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1941/2021),[56] Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), this chapter investigates these authors attempts to depict escape from the American work narrative through the contentious act of refusal of work. Refusal of work, "a concept drawn from the autonomous Marxist tradition," invites a provocative counterargument to traditional capitalist conceptions of work as a pathway to social acceptance and self-actualization by critiquing both "capitalist production and," more importantly "capitalist (as well as socialist) productivism" (Weeks 13). Kathi Week's explains, "the theory and practice of the refusal of work insists that the problem is not just that work cannot live up to the ethic's idealized image, that it neither exhibits the virtues nor delivers the meaning that the ethic promises us in exchange for a lifetime of work, but perhaps also the ideal itself" (14). Whereas other writers included in my dissertation recognize refusal of work as a liminal state of revolt (a la the strike in chapter 3) that will eventually reward the worker with a closer simulacrum of the idealized image of work that is perpetuated by the American work narrative; Ellison, Wright, and Hurston consider it, in

[56] Technically, Wright wrote the manuscript for *The Man Who Lived Underground* from "July 1941 to early spring 1942," between the publication of *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945) and while he was working on *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) ("Note" 221). After being rejected by Wright's publisher, two excerpts of the novel were included in the Spring 1942 issue of *Accent*, and in 1944 a heavily excised version was included in Edwin Seaver's *Cross-Section: An Anthology of New American Writing* (224). This same version was eventually included in Wright's short story collection *Eight Men* (1961) after appearing in several other short story collections throughout the years.

various ways, as a potential alternative to capitalism—a prolonged state of unproductivity. As an ideological counterweight to my first chapter's considerations of national labor utopia, this chapter explores the possibilities in rejecting outright the American work narrative to address the toxic realities of the nationalist rhetoric of moral industriousness generally and desires to assimilate Black Americans in the industrial ethos idealized in Edward Bellamy's utopian fantasy specifically.

Wright, Ellison, and Hurston refuse the assimilationist calls by both white and Black society for Black workers to cultivate "a respectable and efficient work ethic" and "a new 'industrial consciousness'" as a means of demonstrating worth to a white capitalist society (Lawrie 9). Instead, these calls to conformity and self-reliance are presented in the novels under analysis as paradoxical assertions that ensure the continuance of an exploitative capitalist system that upholds white supremacist fantasies of paternalism and Black objectification. As Nathaniel Mills highlights, both Wright's and Ellison's, and I would add Hurston's, fiction contains a "relative lack of empowering portraits of labor. . . . industrial and agricultural work is more often entrapping than yielding of insight or agency, and the classical Marxist emphasis on labor as the catalyst of proletarianization and revolution is largely absent" (46). Rather, it would be fair to say that in each of the novels under analysis, work proves to be direct inhibitor to radical thinking, a mode of assimilation meant to repress behavior deemed inappropriate to white society. As I point out in chapter two, the proletarian logic of empowerment through work often serves to reinforce allegiance to and acceptance of capitalism's commodification of the worker and their labor. Instead, the generative act of envisioning a post-work future represents the meaningful imaginative work of the novels, opening to their protagonists new ways of seeing the world and understanding their place in it. Alternately, these three authors imagine a heterodoxic

mode of existence that actively antagonizes traditional definitions of labor-centric self-actualization through anti-productivist modes of labor abstention or laxity. Unlike the utopians of the first chapter—who wed social salvation to a worker's sublimation of the self to the homogeneity of the capitalist machine—Wright, Ellison, and Hurston insist upon an exodus from assimilation that sends their protagonists on a journey to selfhood that moves from a starting point of objectification within labor to a state of subjectification outside its boundaries.

Like the broader genre of migration literature, which marks a major genre in African American literature, these authors center movement and displacement as inviolable acts of enlightenment and freedom.[57] As Joe William Trotter details, movement represents a vital tool of Black resistance to white oppression since the time of enslavement: "From the inception of the transatlantic slave trade through the Civil War, [African Americans] challenged capitalist control of their labor through frequent movement from place to place, initially as enslaved fugitives and later as free wage earners of color; revolts and plots to revolt; entrepreneurial pursuits; and, most of all, the creation of a plethora of community-based institutions" (Trotter xvii-xviii). Unlike white narratives of labor migration, such as Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited* (1933) and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which depict a worker's odyssey toward labor salvation, movement and displacement as a state of intentional intransigence is not analogous to being adrift but is representative of a dynamism that affords one the power to move through and toward spaces, both literal and theoretical, that are otherwise off limits. By embracing the future

[57] As explained by Farah Jasmine Griffin, the migration narrative—dominant in Black music, visual art, and literature—is traditionally concerned with "the movement of a major character or the text itself from a provincial (not necessarily rural) Southern or Midwestern site (home of the ancestor) to a more cosmopolitan, metropolitan area" (3). Importantly, as narratives of development that suspend the bourgeois conformism of the traditional bildungsroman, and thus avoid its facile dichotomy between the rural and the urban as sites of evil and good, migration narratives provide opportunities for Black writers to conduct critical evaluations of both the "unsophisticated" oppressive powers of the South—often enacted through "lynching, beating, and rape"—and the "more subtle and sophisticated" powers of the North—associated with "a change in time, space, and technology" (5).

as an open process of creation, a reality as yet unformed, the novels under consideration in this chapter defy the stigmas against utopianism often intended to dismiss radical thinking as impractical or fatuous compared to more "politically feasible goals" by insisting on the practicality of utopian thinking as a substantive mode of creating "a different world, a world in which the program or policy that the [utopian] demand promotes would be considered as a matter of course both practical and reasonable" (Weeks 176). For, as Weeks contests, "whether or not utopianism as a type of speculative practice or mode of political aspiration is necessarily unrealistic . . . depends on what counts as real" (189). "After all," Weeks contends, "the assumption that reality is static, that the future will not be different from the present, is hardly realistic" (189).

Ellison wrestles with the imaginative conception of reality in *Invisible Man* shortly after witnessing the murder of Clifton. Stumbling along the subway platform, the invisible man questions why Clifton would choose to "plunge outside of history" to "peddle an obscenity" (438). While the obscenity Clifton peddles is a sambo doll, a deeply racist holdover from nineteenth century minstrelsy, the implication of Clifton's deviance, Clifton's refusal to conform to white propriety, forces the invisible man to question his allegiance to the Brotherhood and his role in perpetuating the injustices of history. As James B. Haile points up, the question inherent here is: "Can a black man live outside history and reason? Can a black man challenge history and reason?" (83). Although the invisible man comes to no solid conclusions in these moments of mental plunging into the abstractions of possibility, he does relinquish a certain amount of faith in the so-called objectivity of reality as characterized by history and the Brotherhood who have been exploiting him for their gains: "What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment . . . What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of

paranoid guile" (Ellison, *Invisible* 441). He worries that his faith in a scientific conception of reality, a conception of the world that was used by both capitalists and socialists to promote productivist rhetorics of worker empowerment, has kept him from "running and dodging the forces of history" toward a better future (441).

In his moment of uncertainty, the invisible man plunges into a mode of thinking representative of what Ernest Bloch defines as "the 'Not-Yet-Conscious,'" wherein "creativity and . . . intellectual productivity" are engaged to conceive reality as "a process in which we can intervene" (qtd in Weeks 189). In the liminal space of the Not-Yet-Conscious one can attune to "nascent expressions of political reason and imagination inspired by the desire for and will to new and better forms of life, even if only in this limited and—in Bloch's estimation—unambitious form" (Weeks 193). In each of the novels under analysis, the characters find utopian revelation in geographical space—a form of underground—that allows them to explore their Not-Yet-Consciousness in solitude. In Wright and Ellison's novels, these undergrounds are literal underground spaces in which their protagonists become anonymous watchers of the world above. In Hurston's novel, the underground is represented by the Muck, an agrarian space in which work is minimized to its subsistence value. Each underground is liminal by design, intended as a recuperative outer zone—a momentary plunge out of history—that frees the protagonists from the tightly regulated time and space of capitalist society. However, as one might expect, the liminality of these zones proves a double-edged sword, as their impermanence means that the protagonists must eventually return to the societies that they fled. This reality leads to varying outcomes in the novels read, as each protagonist reckons with the tension between intellectual enlightenment and the ossified cultural values. This is particularly true of Wright and Ellison's novels, both of which end with uncertainty about the effects of their

characters' reckonings with their attachment to work. Hurston's novel proves the exception, as Janie, the novel's protagonist, returns from the Muck with an explicit understanding of the imaginative power of the "Not-Yet-Conscious" to reshape both her and her community's consciousness.

Fostering a "new industrial consciousness": The Black Worker in the Twentieth Century

Black work in the twentieth century is best understood in relation to the Great Migration, a mass movement of Black workers from the periphery of the rural South to urban centers in both the South and North. Beginning with the Pennsylvania Railroad Company's efforts to fill labor shortages in 1916, the Great Migration saw the transplantation of more than one million Black workers from 1916 and 1930 (Marks 1). Between 1916 and 1918 alone, "over 400,000 black migrants left the south" at "an average rate of over 16,000 per month, 500 per day" (14, 1). Due to a confluence of circumstances that essentially made the rural South inhospitable to Black workers, including a boll weevil invasion that destroyed cotton production, the ongoing brutality of Jim Crow oppression, and the subsumption of Southern industry into Northern corporations, migration grew to become more than simply a pathway to a more affluent life, it represented an escape from the slow death of Southern hostility toward Black existence. As William H. Harris notes in his study of Black workers, Black migrants were as much invested in the opportunities for social justice the North promised as they were in opportunities for better employment (58).

Additionally, the outbreak of World War I created a labor vacuum in the manufacturing industry, which had simultaneously lost the vast majority of its workforce to the suspension of immigration from warring countries while companies amassed huge orders to supply European armies with munitions and supplies. As "immigration from the nations at war immediately

ceased," Carole Marks explains, "there was a marked decrease in immigration from other countries." At the same time, "American immigrants in large numbers departed to join the fighting forces of their native lands. . . . By 1918, almost as many Europeans left as came into the United States." (94) [58] For many, although not all, the war's demand for Black labor, like its call for Black soldiers, offered "a referendum on assimilation," a means test for Black Americans' access to the American Dream (95).[59] While there were outspoken opponents to a Black alliance with white industry, the general consensus, including amongst Black intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois, was that the war provided an ideal moment for Black workers to "shed the debilitating taint of blackness and its connotations of laziness, ignorance, and inefficiency and work their way to respectability" (Lawrie 47). Later, Alain Locke would urge Southern Blacks "to leave the 'medieval South' for the North, where African American laborers could 'brush elbows' with whites at work" (Hapke 198). Thus, Black workers' departure from the margins of southern rurality into the mainstream of industrial capitalism is intimately tied to wartime calls for national collectivism and a desire to work their Americanness into existence.

However, in reality, Black workers were only permitted into the "republican body politic along carefully proscribed lines" (Lawrie 48). While Southern Blacks were promised improved conditions in the North, most found little aspirational work on arrival.[60] According to Marks,

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[58] To help conceptualize the United States' dependency on non-native workers, Carole Marks provides worthwhile data on the prominence of foreign-born workers in the American labor system: "By 1910, the foreign born made up a quarter of the nation's work force, and in many of the industries closest to the industrial center, the foreign born were a clear majority. For example, 48% of the workers in coal mines were foreign born, 67% in iron mines, 76% in clothing factories, 76% in slaughter and packing houses, and 53% in steel mills. The Immigration Commission concluded in that year that the economic expansion of the previous two decades would not have been possible without the 'immigrant hordes'" (91).

[59] Black Americans would see a similar gesture of benevolent national brotherhood during World War II when, according to William H. Harris, the National War Labor Board "took pains to point out" in an order issued to end wage differentials that "*America needs the Negro . . . The Negro is necessary for winning the war*" (114). Of course, the Board also noted that Black Americans also need "the opportunity to work and fight."

[60] I should note that the nuances of the Great Migration are beyond the scope of this chapter, and I encourage anyone interested in learning more to seek out Harris' *The Harder We Run: Black Workers Since the Civil War* (1982), Carole Marks' *Farwell—We're Good and Gone: The Great Black Migration* (1989), and Paul R.D. Lawrie's

“most who went North were hired in low-paid work regardless of their skill or experience. The majority became unskilled or semiskilled operatives.” Even workers with previous experience in skilled professions “were banned from them in the North by company policy, urban regulations, or craft tradition where there was no union,” an ironic imposition considering the restrictions of Jim Crow they had recently left for more freedom in the North (121). Not only were Black migrants more likely to find work in heavy industries, such as “mills, stockyards, and factories rather than in hotels, restaurants, and domestic kitchens,” they were almost exclusively employed in “the lowest-level jobs—dirty work shunned by the native white population. They worked in vulnerable positions from which they were laid off at the first sign of economic downturn and moved into positions from which there was no upward mobility” (Harris 59; Marks 3). As Harris concludes of the 1910s surge in Black employment in industrial occupations, “In short, no fundamental change took place between black and white workers and between black workers and white employers during the war. Employers simply experimented with the use of black labor during the emergency” (61).

The brutality of these low-skill jobs is the subject of William Attaway’s *Blood on the Forge* (1941). Set in 1919, the novel follows three brothers as they migrate from Kentucky to a steel mill in Pittsburgh after one brother, Big Mat, kills a white overseer on the land they farm. The novel captures the slow decay of the brothers as they succumb to the cruelty of the mill, manifest in both the abominable working conditions and the hostile white community that shuns them. As a piece of realist fiction interested in the harsh realities of migration, Laura Hapke explains, the novel represents a “revision of the Pullman-to-Harlem labor fiction of the Harlem Renaissance era” that “presents a far grimmer landscape” of Black life in the North (214). By the

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Forging a Laboring Race: The African American Worker in the Progressive Imagination (2016) for the full, intricate scope of the Black transition from rural South to the urban South and North in the early twentieth century.

novel's end, one brother is blinded, while another is maimed and left unable to play his guitar. Big Mat, whose violence initiated the brothers' flight North and affords him respect within the mill, has the most developed arc of the novel, moving from devoted worker to a scab subordinate to the town sheriff before being killed in a fight with union workers. The novel's grim depiction of Black inner life being crushed by the unrelenting struggle of industrial work became the focus of Ralph Ellison's review of the novel, which he criticizes for positing that Black folkhood could not withstand the smelting fires of modern technology: "Conceptionally, Attaway grasped the destruction of the folk, but missed its rebirth on a higher level. The writer did not see that while the folk individual was being liquidated in the crucible of steel, he was also undergoing fusion with new elements" ("Great" 24).

One such worker reborn in the "crucible of steel" is the Pullman porter, an exclusively Black occupation closely associated with the New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance that imbued Black men with a level of class and income that set them apart from struggling Black families unable to afford living in the urban centers to which they moved. While the Pullman company began hiring Black workers in 1867, the Pullman porter is tied to the twentieth century because of the quantity of Black workers employed at the job: By World War I, Pullman employed around 12,000. This made Pullman the largest employer of Black workers in the country (Harris 60). According to Harris, the Pullman porters made more than Black schoolteachers, one of the few respectable professions available to college-educated Black men (77). Working as a Pullman modernized the railroads symbolic power as a vessel of freedom in the African American tradition by providing a high enough salary for Black men "to marry, raise a family, and gain respect from working- and middle-class blacks" (Hapke 201-2). Importantly, in terms of accruing generational wealth, wages for a Pullman porter or dining car waiter were high enough

for Black men to afford homes (202). This is not to say that Pullman porters avoided the humility of bowing and scraping to white patrons. Quite the opposite, porters were around-the-clock servants to white passengers expected to jump at their beck and call—porters did not receive set off-hours during trips, even for sleep—resulting in an estimated 400-hour work month (or, a roughly 100-hour workweek) (Harris 78). Nevertheless, working on the rails put the Black workman in motion and laid track for Black authors to explore the possibilities of Black flight from white society. The power of the Pullman for Black labor progress informs Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), a novel explicitly interested in the Pullman as a cosmopolitan figure capable of flitting "back and forth across the country, visiting regularly places most blacks could never dream of seeing" (Harris 78). For McKay, migration represents "a form of control over experience" that allows his Pullman porter protagonist Jake Brown to exercise "the wanderer's privilege of leaving and returning at will" (Hapke 206). However, Jake's empowerment is a distinctly individualistic and gendered one, a propulsive energy accessible only to him and his male peers. As a result, Jake's liberty is often set against less successful and unenlightened Black men and the women Jake encounters on his journeys. Such presentations of labor power underscore the gender disparity between Black men and women.

For Black women, the shift to urban centers was largely a lateral move, as most available work revolved around domestic labor, largely the same kind of occupations as those afforded them in the South. Inverse to the pullman or dining car worker, the domestic worker is a static figure, trapped within the confines of the home. It is worth noting that wartime scarcity, especially during World War II, did open opportunities for Black women to find employment in industrial and clerical positions. However, as with Black men who obtained skilled positions during these interstices, once white soldiers returned home Black workers were the first to be

cut. “Most commonly, whether in New York or Philadelphia, Detroit, Chicago or Washington, D.C., two-thirds of servants in the 1920s were black women who had traded a southern job as a domestic for a better-paying northern one” (Hapke 199). The shift from South to North allowed Black women workers to “shift the conditions of their work from those of live-in servant to day work” (Hill Collins 55). Essentially providing the same kind of work on the job, the day worker was liberated from the imprisonment that live-in domestics and Pullman porters suffered under. In short, these women could go home at the end of the day, giving them a modicum of freedom as compared to their Southern counterparts. Still, these Black women were subject to the same kinds of dehumanizing treatment that other Black service workers faced, such as what one former domestic called the “Bronx slave market,” a system of hiring that required Black women to congregate at an assigned spot on the street to be perused for hire by white employers (56).

While the Great Migration opened opportunities for better living, the low skill work offered to Black Americans only served to further racial prejudices, as they became evidence of Black workers incompetence and lethargy on the job. Not only could employers use Black workers as justification to depress wages, but Black workers also served as ideal scapegoats for employer abuse, functioning variously as scabs at striking factories or as replacements to deter white workers from considering striking (Marks 111). However, as Marks explains, “the greatest benefit to employers was that the appearance of a population crippled by a host of interrelated problems was always stronger than the reality of one hampered by exploitation”:

> Believed to be fundamentally stupid, docile, and apathetic, feeling the oppression of the South, strangers in a new land whose natives viewed them with suspicion, the labor migrants became easy targets. Why are wages low? Black workers have been brought in from the South. Why have conditions in the factories deteriorated? Black workers have

been brought in from the South. Why are white men idle? Black men have been brought in from the South. Their sins were so accepted, they were forced to beg for the very privilege of being exploited. (112)

The pervasiveness of racist stereotypes about Black workers meant that most of the discourse around acclimating migrants to urban living and industrial labor focused on instilling in them "a new industrial consciousness that would transform them into responsible citizen workers" worthy of whites' respect (Lawrie 52). Organizations like the National Urban League and the Department of Negro Economics, under the Department of Labor, were tasked with solving what commentators called "the growing Negro problem" (qtd in Lawrie 48). Like Progressive reformers before them, these organizations set to work on plans to assimilate the Black worker to the strictures of so-called white industry, providing courses on "time-work discipline and . . . the requisite mechanical skills and knowledge needed to become efficient industrial laborers" (49). Additionally, because the Black worker was presumed to be innately inferior to their white counterparts—more than just a matter of temperament, Black workers were understood as physiologically incapable of matching white workers—organizations actively sought out "industries that lent themselves to Taylorist standardization" as a means of "demonstrating the mechanical skill and discipline of black workers" (55).[61] Not only does this signal an urban replication of the rural laboring that kept Black workers under the thumb of white landowners, but it also insisted on a work ethic that defined Black excellence by a worker's capacity to toil endlessly without fuss.

[61] Lawrie notes that while "the managerial quest for standardized efficiency saw all working bodies as *deficient by definition* and relentlessly sought to purge labor processes of the stubborn human element that consistently thwarted their attempts for systematic efficiency," the Black body suffered from "innate abnormalities" that defined it as fundamentally inflexible (69).

Thus, Black workers who epitomized the industrial philosophy of efficiency, acumen, and unwavering devotion to work, unsurprisingly, became symbols of Black excellence. Workers like Charles Knight, a navy riveter, and Edward Burwell, the captain of a pile-driving crew, were renowned for their industriousness and contribution to white society. Both Knight and Burwell set records in their respective occupations, Knight riveting 4,875 studs in nine hours and Burwell and his crew driving "220 sixty-five-foot piles in nine hours and five minutes, amid a terrific downpour" (Lawrie 56). Both men were applauded for their contributions to American labor and held up as models of Black self-reliance: "Knight's perseverance in the face of unrelenting racial prejudice made him an ideal model of the patriotic, efficient Negro type" (56). It is men like Knight and Burwell, and their near religions devotion to work, that Richard Wright casts in his novel, *The Man Who Lived Underground*.

"'Abstract' Living" and Work Aboveground in Richard Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground*

In a companion essay to *The Man Who Lived Underground*, titled "Memories of My Grandmother," Wright explains that "the idea—or, if you prefer to call it, the concept—back of *The Man Who Lived Underground* . . . is centered around the ardent and volatile religious disposition of my grandmother" (164). Troubled by the ontological stranglehold of his grandmother's religious observance, "a form of religious ritual that encompasses and regulates every moment of living," Wright set out to articulate the inner structure "of her religious personality" in the protagonist of the novel, Fred Daniels (164, 165). However, Wright clarifies that his grandmother was not the sole influence on his writing the novel; rather, Wright explains that the novel is a broader investigation of what he defines as "'abstract' living" and the

"illogical if not degrading" laws that govern such an existence (173, 165). Wright defines "'abstract' living" as a mode of existence "that does not derive its meaning and sanction from the context of experience, a way of life that is lived *distantly* from the environment even though it subsists on the environment, a way of living that allows or enables or forces the organism to superimpose judgments and values upon their experiences borrowed from somewhere else" (173). Although Wright does not name work directly in the essay, the concept of abstract living, especially as it pertains to religious devotion, appears coterminous with the unquestioning faith in industriousness that governs life under capitalism. When, for example, Wright explains that "during all of my childhood I had lived among people who believed in invisible men, who believed that God, though invisible, actively regulated the most concrete and commonplace happenings of life," one might recall the capitalist assurance that the invisible hand of the free market will auspiciously *regulate* the material world (178).

Fred Daniels is an ideal vessel for Wright to articulate this abstract living and the dangers attendant with such a worldview. Like Ellison's invisible man, Fred begins the novel believing that his conformity to white codes of conduct—in this case the servile role of a Black worker in a white society—shields him, or in some way excludes him, from the bigotry of white society only to recognize later that his sublimation merely veiled his oppression. Fred lives within, but fails to see, the world for what it is. After he is erroneously arrested for the murder of a wealthy white couple and tortured into signing a false confession, he escapes into the sewer, where he undergoes a kind of odyssey of self-discovery. This fortunate fall, or what Wright calls a "breaking," allows Fred to contemplate the abstractions of the aboveground outside the boundaries of the capitalist work ethic: "this breaking, in my opinion, represents a point in life where the past falls away and the character must, in order to go on living, fling himself upon the

face of the formless night and create a world, a *new* world, in which to live" ("Memories" 192). Fred undergoes this breaking in the underground, an illusory space "with other values and other laws" where he can reflect upon and reconstitute himself and his understanding of life (Wright, *The Man* 53). This energizes Fred with new purpose, one separate from his work, and one that he wishes to share and celebrate with the aboveground. However, Wright's metaphysics refuse to glory in the imaginary for long. As Fred himself recognizes while in the underground, "he knew deep down in him that the ultimate decision was still to come, for, though the underground claimed him, it rejected him." (118). What he ultimately recognizes, Michel Fabre explains, is that "The terrestrial universe and the world underground are in fact posed like two sides of the same reality, separated by the thickness of a wall, a partition, or even a clouded window. We cannot suppose for an instant that the fugitive will be able to organize his universe independently of the other, nor that the everyday world will escape his searching look" (15). While the parallelism of the two worlds crackles with creative potential in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), in *The Man Who Lived Underground*, this omnipresent pressure between the two worlds portends an eventual collapse, unsurprisingly, of the imagined underground in which Fred lives. As the novel's title alludes, Fred may live in the underground, but above he is as good as dead. In this assessment of things, there is no possibility for change, as the vanguards of the status quo remain materially in control—a fact realized in a striking scene of Armageddon at the novel's conclusion.

Surprisingly, the novel's grim exegesis on Black mortality stemmed from a rather comic true crime story Wright read in a 1941 issue of *True Detective*. The piece, titled "The Crime Hollywood Couldn't Believe," recounts the exploits of Herbert C. Wright—one wonders if the shared surname sparked Wright's interest—an unemployed thirty-three-year-old white man who

decided to "solve his problem of unemployment by building his world from [the] underground universe" of the sewer system (Fabre 11). Although during his year living underground Herbert committed numerous thefts from a litany of stores in the area, including stealing large sums of money from company safes and consumer goods, he had no intention of using the money for personal gains. In fact, when Herbert was caught, he expressed no ill will toward society and appeared "perfectly sane," helping the police to return the items stolen (11). Wright latched onto the story, going so far as to request Herbert's police record for research, and began work on the novel.[62] What stands outs in the report is Herbert's confession that he felt that he was being "guided at times by his dead mother's voice," who seemed to call him to the businesses he burgled (11). Although Wright makes no mention of the specific features of the story that led him to wed the facts of Herbert's story with the fictional intricacies of Fred's narrative, the religious aspect seemed to capture Wright's attention the most, as this features prominently in every iteration of the story.

In the novel, Wright foregrounds the theological power of work for Fred by starting the novel in medias res as he exits "the big white doors" of his employer's house on his way home to his pregnant wife Rachel (5). Working as a handyman and gardener for the wealthy Wootens, Fred enters the novel like a Black Adam, departing the Garden of Eden of the Wootens' estate after a long day's work. In a state of bliss that is closely tied to religious elation, Fred relishes his exhaustion as a physical expression of the seventeen bills Mrs. Wooten, his employer, has given

[62] Upon completion in December 1941, Wright sent the novel to his agent to be distributed to publishers but found no takers. The reasoning given for declining the manuscript was its length—at 150 pages, it seemed too slim a work to be published as a novel. However, Michel Fabre contends that the publishers' disinterest and critics' lukewarm reception of the short-story version, which was later published in various forms in various magazines, stems from a perception of Wright as a definitive Black realist author, making the existentialism of *The Man Who Lived Underground* appear as an attempt by Wright to affect "European literary fashion" (12). Douglas A. Jones concurs with Fabre's assessment, arguing that "Harper rejected the manuscript . . . because, in my view, the taut, quasi-surrealist novel lacks several of the hallmarks of *Native Son*, such as monstrous killings at the hands of its protagonist and grandiloquent rationalizations of those actions" (124).

him: “Tired and happy, he liked the feeling of being paid of a Saturday night; during seven sweltering days he had given his bodily strength in exchange for dollars with which to buy bread and pay rent for the coming week” (5). The bills take on a talismanic power to Fred as he counts them and grips them in his fists. They represent Fred’s role in the labor system and, he assumes, provide him participatory respect. Yet, Wright identifies the exchange value of Fred’s work in a cyclical order that hints at the endlessness of his labor and the precarity of his position, while also highlighting its sublimity to Fred. Seven days’ work for seventeen dollars to sustain him for the next seven days until he receives the next seventeen dollars, so on and so forth. In the narrow bounds of this world, Fred’s only release is church on Sundays, which he endows with the rejuvenating power to get him through the coming week. Thus, Fred lives a kind of pitiful retelling of the Christian creation story in which he endlessly repeats God’s seven-day cycle without ever actually creating anything of his own. Those seven days of creation go toward the formation and care of a white world Fred is only allowed to work in.

Fred’s revelry is almost immediately interrupted by the arrival of a squad car occupied by three police officers—Lawson, Johnson, and Murphy—who abruptly arrest Fred and take him to the police station for interrogation. In the brief span of time between Fred’s departure from the Wootens’ and his encounter with Lawson and his goons, a neighbor’s house owned by the Peabodys had been burglarized and the Peabodys killed. And because of police apathy toward solving the crime, the first Black man found on the street, in this case Fred, is picked up as the likely suspect. Although Fred has nothing on his person besides the money given to him as pay, he is immediately handcuffed and treated as a combative suspect. Surprisingly, Fred’s immediate response to Lawson’s accusation is relaxed, “he had no fear about all this . . . confident that he would eventually give an explanation that would free him” (9). It is never made clear what

makes Fred assume that he can clear his name aside from a description of Fred's sight, but one assumes that it has something to do with his sense of respectability as a gainfully employed and devoutly religious Black man. Fred looks upon the situation "unseeingly," suggesting that Wright understands Fred as a man already living in a kind of delusion about his own accomplishments (9). What Fred fails to recognize is that his Blackness automatically disqualifies him from due process or even basic human respect. Indeed, Fred's Black working-class social position automatically "makes him vulnerable to overdetermination, or stereotyping, that further dispossesses him of subjecthood in the eyes of the police and spectators alike" (Istomina 114). Assured that he can make the officers understand "that they were not dealing with a stray bum," Fred processes his situation through a naïve logic of binaries that presumes his work, manifest in the money he carries in his pocket, will signal his humanity to the police (Wright, *Man* 10). Lawson is quick to disabuse Fred of his misconceptions.

Lawson's accusation that Fred killed the Peabodys for money instantaneously desecrates Fred's sense of his own respectability as a Black worker and threatens him with legal enslavement—his inevitable incarceration. More than just the physical violence inflicted on Fred, which comes with vulgar fury once Lawson brings Fred to the police station, the police strike at Fred's psychic understanding of himself and the world, triggering a dissociative episode that leaves him in a state of existential agony. As Fred tries to answer the police honestly, explaining his whereabouts during the day and pleading with them to reach out to one of the community leaders that would vouch for his virtuousness, he grows more distraught by the officers' unwillingness to honor his narrative. Lawson, as representative of the "scopic regime," does not care to understand Fred as an individual man with unique characteristics, morality, or life experiences—Fred's unique résumé of accomplishments, ethics, and respectability—cannot

stand up against “stereotypical images of people of color that serve to diminish human complexity and dignity” (Istomina 115). This constitutes what Shawn Michelle Smith defines as “the frame(-up),” a conceptual enclosing of the Black individual into a fetishized image that makes him both “overly visible and invisible, a spectacle and a specter” (271). After hours of Lawson’s abuse, Fred begins to feel that “these questions had the power of projecting him into a strange orbit where, though he was not guilty of a crime, they made him feel somehow guilty” (Wright, *Man* 15). And although Fred fights against these oppressive thoughts, the precarity of his reality drives him to hysterics “as he felt that he did not exist for them” (23). The police tactics inevitably work, as Fred’s sense of personhood dissolves under their constant barrage and battery. In this dehumanized state, a form of unbeing that leaves him malleable to their wishes, Fred resembles one of the Sambo dolls from Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, caught by the strings and bandied about under the control of the white hand. Wright captures this in Fred’s inability to even parse out the boundaries between his reality and the one constructed by Lawson to satisfy a white suspicion of Black fugitivity: “it was that what these men said, what he said, the blows and curse words, were all neutral and powerless to alter the feeling that, though he had done nothing wrong, he was condemned, lost, inescapably guilty of some nameless deed” (36). By the time Fred agrees to sign a confession, a final act of desperation to leave the station and see his pregnant wife, he is so physically and morally weak that the police must guide his hand as he “scribbled his name” (27).

Assured of Fred’s cooperation, Lawson agrees to let Fred see his wife before he is booked for the crime. When they arrive at the house, Fred’s wife goes into labor, setting in motion a rather farcical scene in which the police must drive her to the hospital to deliver. While at the hospital, Fred makes the impulsive decision to escape. Down four flights of stairs, out a

back window, and Fred escapes the police. When they pursue, Fred descends into the sewers through a manhole he finds open.

In his descent into the underground, Fred experiences a true spiritual transformation, a surreal exaltation of consciousness that at first overwhelms him with a tranquility unfelt in the aboveground. Like Ellison's invisible man, Fred descends into an inky and unknowable blackness for survival and initially finds the descent frightening. Dropping into the "black space" of the sewer, Fred is swept through the tunnels by the rush of water, made once again into a passive figure. The atomization of the self in the total dark of the underground initially recalls the dehumanization inflicted on Fred by Lawson—a stripping away of what Fred believes are the vital signifiers of his existence. However, unlike the puppetry of the police, Fred's delivery into the darkness "provides enlightening introspection which leads [him] to interrogate normativity" (Wester 276). In the interstices of "gape and rift" that distinguish the underground from the solidity of the aboveground, Fred finds a site of origin through which he can create (Fisher 165). Rebecka Fisher contends that the underground provides a space of creation where Fred can "redefine the nature of his existence and ultimate reality of things" (166). This is represented in the novel through the image of suspension, a positionality that recalls omnipotence and detachment. Often, Fred is forced to climb along pipes to move through the underground, which frequently leads him to witness events from on high. This grows to become an existential phenomenon, often triggered by moments of revelation, such as when Fred observes the services of a basement church:

> The church singing had stopped and in the silence and darkness that followed he really did not exist as a personality; his emotional state had reached a high point in its tensity and had *suspended*. As though for purposes of renewal, he had for a time gone back into

> the insensible world out of which life had originally sprung, and, before he could live again, hope or plan again, a regrouping of his faculties into a new personality structure would be necessary. (Wright, *Man* 107-8; emphasis added).

In observing the churchgoers, Fred recognizes a newly formed distance between them that fosters new feelings toward their prayer. While Fred recognizes that "he had always felt what they felt" living above ground, he now found their religiosity as a "defenseless nakedness" (63). Instead of bowing and scraping with "hands . . . reaching outward into a cold, vast darkness for something that was not there," Fred wishes for them to "stand silent, unrepentant, with simple manly pride, and yield no quarter to whimpering." In terms of work, it is clear that Fred is reckoning with his own sycophancy toward work and white acceptance, frustrated by the endemic docility of a Black community content to grovel for "something that could never be there" (63). Wester posits that "Fred can see how [religious conviction] acts as a deterrent from radical change, producing Black acceptance of destructive subservience instead" (278). What Fred now recognizes but the Black congregation fails to see is that they both "reside in the sewer wasteland of unwanted detritus" that is the American subaltern (278). This is literalized when Fred discovers a dead baby in the sewer shortly after leaving the church meeting. Struck with the horror of it, Fred "flushed with a nameless shame" and guilt that is both abhorrently powerful and futile (65-6). This comes to be a symbolic repetition throughout Fred's time underground that weds work life with death. The image of death and work are frequently juxtaposed as Fred wanders through the underground, encountering cadavers and workmen in mirrored prostrate positions of moribund passivity. In Fred's newly formed cosmology of the underground, the religiosity of the worker is inextricably linked to the slow march toward death represented by the cadavers.

After the church and the baby, one of the first businesses that Fred stumbles upon is a mortuary, where he peeps through a keyhole to observe the corpse of a Black man on the autopsy table. Through the “narrow line of his vision,” Fred spots “the nude, waxen body of a black man stretched out upon a long white table” (68). Looking upon the “wax-like and semi-transparent pallor” of the corpse, Fred’s eyes are drawn to the “many medical instruments” arrayed around the body and his ears pick up on the subtle droning of chatter between the morticians (68). The confluence of death, the cold science embodied in the mortuary tools, and “sensually” discoursing morticians evokes an image of Black death as white pleasure, the dead body recalling the trauma of experimentation and the casual nature of white efforts at Black genocide. Furthermore, the proximity of the dead baby to the dead man signals Fred’s growing sense that being Black in America means existing with the specter of death forever hanging over you. The pervasive of death is emphasized by Fred’s return to the mortuary later in the novel to discover that a brown-skinned woman occupies the table previously inhabited by the Black man. The sight of the new body massifies Black death into a systemic, assembly line process of brutality that reduces Black *people* into Black *bodies*. Fred balks at the image of “an endless succession of . . . men and women . . . standing in long lines outside of the undertaker’s door, waiting their turn to lie upon the white table” (127). In this apocalyptic vision of mass death, Fred envisions the dead as waiting people, suggesting that they are culpable in their own death, waiting, like the churchgoers, for their death to release them from the burdens of life.

Fred stumbles upon one of these waiting dead during his raid of a jewelry store in the form of the night watchman entombed in his basement office. After looting the store, Fred descends to the basement to find the watchman sleeping in an underground room. Deep in sleep, the guard appears dead. It takes Fred several moments of close scrutiny to determine that no, “the

man was not dead," at least not in a literal sense (102). However, as a visual recreation of the corpse Fred observed earlier, the man signals the living death that Fred has come to associate with work. What is more, the watchman concentrates this relationship between work and death into a fine point through the particular function of the job: "This poor night watchman's job was to kill or lay down his life to protect those rings and diamonds and watches" (103). "What a fool! A man with a gun risking his precious life each night—the only life he will ever have on this earth—to protect sparkling bits of stone that looked for all the world like glass" (104). In his new consciousness, Fred cannot comprehend the logic of such an existence and finds the man's employment an inane act of self-sacrifice on par with the churchgoers' conviction to God and greener pastures in the next life. This is expressed in the photograph of the man's family taken "against a background of open fields" (103). Reminiscent of the Elysian fields in Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*, the image represents an unobtainable ecstasy, withheld by the boundaries of the frame of the picture. Simultaneously close and far away, it remains a visage to be idolized and deferred. This nearly brings Fred to jostle the man awake "and tell him" about his foolishness, but Wright evocatively concludes the sentence with ellipses, an elision that will become Fred's impotence throughout the rest of the novel. When Fred makes a second visit to the store after the jewelers have reported his thefts and blamed the night watchman, Fred hopes that the interrogation by the police will awaken the watchman like it awakened him. He sees in the brutalized face of the watchman a mirror of himself and wishes for his enlightenment:

> He, too, had been dumped upon the floor, so closely did he identify himself with the watchman; but it was not an identification stemming from pity; no, he felt that this was somehow a good thing; it would awaken the watchman from his long sleep of death,

> would let him see, through the harsh condemnation of Murphy, more of the hidden landscape than he would ever see in any other way. (126)

But Fred realizes that no amount of violence would be enough to wake the masses to the brutality being acted upon them daily. In that moment he wants to scream out against the violence, but he finds himself mute. Once again Fred holds back, frightened by the fact that "there was nothing he could do" (127). It is shortly after this that Fred returns to the morgue, addressed above, and makes the resolution to return to the aboveground.

Although, Fred confesses, "he did not understand" what he was supposed to do, he recognizes a propulsive force emanating from the underground that appears to be driving him back up to the surface. Perhaps aware that he would be as much dead in life if he remained in the underground as those who live in death above, Fred determines to return with his message from the underground. As such, Fred's decision to return parallels the invisible man's and Janie's decisions to rejoin society on a mission of class consciousness; however, Wright rejects the optimism of Ellison and Hurston's novel.

Upon his emergence, Fred fears that he will be bombarded by a mob of people ready to "cart him off to be killed"; however, he finds that life moves on steadily: "nobody seemed to pay any attention to him" (134). Fred realizes, somewhat to his horror, that he is as (in)visible as he was before he descended into the sewer. Although he has undergone a monumental inner shift of consciousness, the world sees nothing but another disheveled Black man wandering through the street. This is punctuated by Fred's confrontation with Lawson at the police station, where Fred goes to clear his name. During the course of Fred's time underground, the police have arrested the actual killer, making Fred's efforts to speak on the events that preceded his descent into the sewer a liability for Lawson. As Fred tries to explain everything, he is shocked to witness

Lawson's power over reality when he burns the confession that the police forged and forced Fred to sign. This moment, like Fred's initial descent, triggers a crisis of consciousness, as Fred learns his final lesson: No amount of knowledge on his part can change the state of things aboveground. "He stared, thunderstruck. His lips moved soundlessly. Were they joking with him? They had burnt up the one thing that had given a meaning to his life! The dim light of the underground was fleeing and the terrible darkness of day stood before him" (145). In this moment of total collapse, Fred learns that nothing is real, nothing can be changed, unless it is changed by white hands. Thus, Fred endeavors to show Lawson and his cronies the sewer in the hopes that they will see the futility of life under work in the aboveground like he had, a revelation that might resolve the tensions between whites and Blacks. If everyone could understand the brutality of life under work, the horror of the competitive spirit that drives all against all, they might recognize a shared misery that could be sloughed off to reveal a new universal skin underneath. At the moment of Fred's descent, the world above is tipped askew by air raid sirens and a surprise bombing that sets the city on fire. At the same moment, Lawson kills Fred, marking the underground, previously a sight of rebirth, as Fred's grave.

Like Bigger Thomas of *Native Son*, Fred's capacity to pull the veil back and peer through into the light, does not protect him from the cruel realities of life; rather, it makes him more susceptible to their sting. Of the three novels under review in this chapter, Wright's is the bleakest. Fred's experiences in the underground and his awakening to the manipulations of Black workers are not symbolic of any form of freedom—communal or individual. Fred is burdened with his knowledge as much as he is burden with his ignorance, cursed to suffer through the recognition of the inhumanity of Black oppression and bear witness to Black submission to it alone. This is the crux of Wright's underground, an abject suffering that catches in the throat,

unable to come up and out. Embodied in Fred's inner scream as he watches the night watchman tortured by the interrogating police, justice cannot be uttered. "He wanted to yell," Wright tells us, "the thoughts came to him so hard that he thought he had actually yelled them out," but, Wright contends, they did not. Fred remains silent with the "inescapable emotion that always cut down to the foundations of life": "that emotion that told him that, though he were innocent, he was guilty; though blameless, he was accused; though living, he must die; though possessing faculties of dignity, he must live a life of shame; though existing in a seemingly reasonable world, he must die a certainly reasonless death." (126-27). This comes in the form of falling bombs at the novel's close, as Fred attempts to surface from the underground to share his learning with the world. The closing Armageddon of a surprise air raid on the city is wed with Lawson's execution of Fred. The two synchronized events signal Wright's frustration with what he saw as the inevitability of swift and violent repression of any efforts at broad revolutionary awakening. The personal violence of Lawson is magnified in the falling bombs, signaling an interconnectivity of both local and national violence deployed with wanton disregard for the preservation or improvement of society. Wright's vision of refusal of work resigns itself to an oblivion inescapable and totalizing. Even Ellison's conclusion, which similarly rests on a mass calamity in the form of a riot, suggests the possibility of rebirth in the fires of destruction.

"Through You . . . I Become": The Formulation of White Identity Through Black Labor in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

Although Ellison forecasts the radical transformation of his protagonist in the prologue to *Invisible Man*, his unnamed narrator begins the novel, like Wright's Fred Daniels, in a state of assimilated naivete. "I was naïve," the invisible man confesses in the opening lines of chapter

one, for looking for himself in the opinions of others (15). And, like Daniels, the invisible man has bought into the white lie of Black subordination and ascribes to the Washingtonian idea of Black respectability that assumes hard work will be rewarded with success and, more importantly, acceptance. As the veteran who helps the narrator revive Mr. Norton after the Trueblood encounter exclaims, the narrator "believes in that great false wisdom taught slaves and pragmatists alike, that white is right" (95). In reality, as Daniels learns fairly early and Ellison's invisible man learns quite late, Black labors of respectability are largely understood as tokens of white achievement and paternalism, symbols of Black dependence on white grace. However, unlike Wright's novel, which observes the exploitation of the Black worker from outside, or beneath, the system of exploitation, *Invisible Man* remains firmly within it for almost its entire length. With the exception of the prologue and epilogue, the novel is primarily concerned with the increasingly complex and overlapping networks of white exploitation that ensnare and prey upon the invisible man. As just one example of Ellison's rhetorical cyclicality here, the *trustees*, like Mr. Norton, who wish to sublimate the invisible man into an immortal legacy of their greatness become the *trusties* who dispossess and displace the Black elderly couple in New York. The novel emphasizes the way patterns of oppression form a cycle of disenfranchisement and abuse that perpetuates the master/slave dichotomy through the aegis of work and productivism. In this system, independence, self-reliance, and progress are illusory principles intended to ensure the continuation of dependence, inequality, and exploitation, which keeps the whole system of white supremacist capitalism in motion.

While the narrator's commitment to the orthodoxy of "white is right" is initially presented to the reader as a pathology instilled in him by his parents and grandparents, a lineage of meek and modest workers who "stayed in their place" and "worked hard" (16), Ellison makes

clear that their labor is a part of a larger, Kafkaesque institutionalism built up around Black communities to delude them into misperceiving their hard work as progress. By confusing effort for accomplishment, white society ensures a perpetual community of exploitable laborers willing to sacrifice themselves for the opportunity to rise up and gain acceptance. For the invisible man, these institutions are initially conceived as a school system that envisions Black education in terms of industrial efficiency and conformity. The orthodoxy of the college is later reconstituted in the paint factory, and after that, the brotherhood, which abides by a principle of scientific objectivity that demands unquestioning conformity. As one brother explains to the invisible man after his first oration as spokesman for the Harlem sect of the Brotherhood, "ours is a reasonable point of view. We are champions of a scientific approach to society" (350). This is scientific approach is set in contradistinction to what one Brotherhood member calls the "wild, hysterical, politically irresponsible and dangerous" speech the invisible man gave (349). The objectivity the Brotherhood chides the invisible man for abandoning during his speech—while an obvious reference to the Communist party and the proletarian left, both of which espoused objectivity as their guiding principle—evokes eugenicist argument for the biological inferiority of Black Americans and the necessity of training Black people to abide by white propriety.[63] In both the Brotherhood members' opinion of the Black audience as an uncontrollable "mob" of reactionary energy and their insistence that the invisible man "be trained" to properly orate with scientific respectability, Ellison captures the white insistence that Black Americans are innately unsophisticated and uncivilized (350, 351). Ellison's interweaving of these seemingly disparate

[63] The exactitude of the Brotherhood's messaging, which is often discussed in terms of objective accuracy, is certainly inspired by Leftist writers like Mike Gold, who stressed objectivity as the new artform of the proletarian literary movement in the 1930s; but it also signals a kinship with advancements in industrial labor, such as Frederick Taylor's methods of scientific management. For more on Taylor, see chapter two of this dissertation. Additionally, the Brotherhood's emphasis on scientific accuracy and rationality resonates with Edward Bellamy's conception of labor utopia in his hugely popular nineteenth-century novel, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888). For more on Bellamy, see chapter one of this dissertation.

systems of ordering the world drags to light the pernicious racism that pervades even the seemingly benign systems of revolution.

Eventually, the narrator learns, he must abandon respectable work for the boundlessness of the underground. Importantly, the underground for Ellison is distinct from Wright's in that it represents a criminality that is mitigated by Fred's underground reconceptualization of illegality. While, according to the laws of the aboveground, Fred's extralegal exploits throughout *The Man Who Lives Underground* would be considered criminal, his newfound (underground) understanding of the world refuses simple assessments of right and wrong. True criminality, from Fred's underground vantage, is the law-and-order tactics that codify a system of black-and-white morality as a means of intimidating, coercing, and incarcerating Black Americans. While *Invisible Man* is certainly in dialogue with Wright's novel, the freedom found by Ellison's invisible man is distinctly informed by his understanding of illegality as an active affront to white society and a refusal to comply with its norms. This is perhaps best expressed in the invisible man's ongoing "fight with Monopolated Light & Power" to siphon power from the company without paying (5). By living in the ambiguity of "a boarder area" outside the definite boundaries of a given city or official residence—an unincorporated extra-legal zone—that symbolizes the power the invisible man relishes about his invisibility (5). In this sense, the invisible man's embrace of off-the-grid anonymity becomes a methodology of resistance that exploits the social ostracism of people deemed unproductive (the un- and underemployed) to escape the cycles of exploitation that have largely defined his life. This form of understated rebellion rejects the ethos of Black exceptionalism that motivates his earlier commitment to work diligently for white approval and offers a clandestine means of disseminating his message to others.

One of the first sites of control used to condition the invisible man is the college he briefly attends early in the novel. Modeled after the Tuskegee institute, which Ellison attended as a young man, the college in the novel is depicted as a machine factory devoted to producing pliable workers that validate the ambitions of powerful men like the college's president Dr. Bledsoe and its white patrons, like Mr. Norton. The Tuskegee student manual's description of life on campus explains in no unclear terms that the college was purposefully structured like an industrial factory: "Here, you will find every phase of your life systematically regulated and supervised for the purpose of aiding you in getting the most from your courses." "Tuskegee is a vast workshop," and "work is the chief element awaiting you at every turn" (Rampersad 58). Like Tuskegee, the college in the novel is designed to produce interchangeable cogs that can be slotted into professions as needed to serve the needs of the white patrons and the larger body of white employers that they represent. Andrew Hoberek rightly concludes that "the section of the novel from the battle royal to the narrator's initiation into the factory life at Liberty Paints has less to do with bondage per se than with the racially hierarchical, patronage-dependent, and self-effacing world of service" (62). This is made quite explicit by a visiting white patron to the college, Mr. Norton, who envisions the narrator as both a "cog" in the college's manufacturing process and a mass-produced commodity (Ellison, *Invisible* 45). To this end, the college represents "Black education" as a "white commercial interest" that industrializes "the humanistic drama of self-development" into a colonial institution of repression (Schneider 67). While serving as Norton's chauffeur during his visit to the campus—a position that the narrator naively codifies as his contribution to the "great work" of the college (Ellison, *Invisible* 38)—the grand designs of the college are laid bare as Norton waxes poetic about the student body's part in constituting *his* "fate" (44). As Norton explains in existential terms, "Through you and your

fellow students *I become*, let us say, three hundred teachers, seven hundred trained mechanics, eight hundred skilled farmers, and so on" (45; emphasis added). As such, the narrator is, as the veteran at the Golden Day states outright, a "mechanical man" built for the "achievement of [Norton's] dreams" (94). Not only does this characterization of the school present the Black educational system as an assembly line process for manufacturing mass Black workers, but it also reduces the students to a measure of Norton's metaphysics. Norton's comments on the purpose of the school and the meaning of the students' success overrules the vague aspirations of the narrator to become something through his work. Rather, he is atomized and anonymized by Norton's mythopoesis, made into a meaninglessness commodified for white consumption, which undercuts the narrator's own mythmaking about himself as an autonomous, exceptional individual.

In this sense, the narrator provides an ontological labor far more valuable than the amount of money it costs to support him, as Norton makes plain in his insistence on the narrator's role in his personal destiny. By reinscribing the system of oppression as social progress, the narrator aids the continuation of white supremacy and ensures that the status quo remains rigidly enforced. This is articulated by Emerson, the son of a trustee who reveals to the narrator that the letters of introduction he had been delivering to various businessmen in New York City in fact warned against providing him aid, when he explains that "with us it's still Jim and Huck Finn" (187-88). While Emerson's comment postures as allyship—"I know the conditions under which you live," he assures the narrator—it belies a predatory kindness that exoticizes the same kind of servility that the narrator provided at the college (188).[64] For

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[64] In his monograph, *Anxious Men: Masculinity in American Fiction of the Mid-Twentieth Century* (2020), Clive Baldwin addresses Ellison's conception of masculinity in *Invisible Man*. While Ellison makes moves to counter stereotypical depictions of the over-sexed Black masculine, he also engages crass anxieties about gay men. As the

Emerson, being his Jim entails valeting for him and joining his stable of Black acquaintances as a token of his bohemian cool. As Hoberek explains, Emerson's reference to Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* "implicitly acknowledges the feminized, eager-to-serve qualities of Twain's Jim," and assumes the narrator's destined role as the perennial servant to the white master (62). While Emerson attempts to mask his offer of employment as an act of liberation from the confines of the South—"Why go back," he asks the narrator, "there is so much you could do here where there is more freedom"—he is, like Norton before him and the Brotherhood after, intent on maintaining racial order through service employment (Ellison, *Invisible* 188). Aware, perhaps only subconsciously, of the imminent danger of once again being the totem for the white emergent self—"Who has an identity anymore anyway?" assures young Emerson at the narrator's realization that he has been cast off from the only life he ever knew (187)—the narrator flees Emerson's office and finds work at the Liberty Paint factory.

This scene, more often addressed as a prelude to the infamous hospital episode that proceeds it, is arguably the only one in the novel to present a traditional depiction of blue-collar labor. The focal point of other radical or leftist novels, Ellison moves swiftly through the invisible man's experience as a day laborer to arrive at his encounter with the underground alchemist, Lucius Brockway, who prepares the "guts" for the paint that is mixed in the factory above (214). Unceremoniously hired and placed under the supervision of Mr. Kimbro, The narrator is initially tasked with mixing an unknown black substance into buckets of paint to create the signature optic white color the company is contracted to produce for government monuments. This image, one of Ellison's many evocative metaphors in the novel to highlight the running theme of Black erasure and subordination, evokes the parasitic relationship between

only gay character in the novel, Emerson's son represents the assumptions of the time that gay men were psychologically imbalanced and predatory (C. Baldwin 220).

white and Black Americans. In order to produce paint "as white as George Washington's Sunday-go-to-meetin' wig," the factory requires ten "dead black" drops of emulsifier (202, 200). Like Norton's and Emerson's vampiric drive to consume the narrator as a means of achieving their own becoming, the paint's vitality depends upon the consumption of black death. As a commentary on race relations in America, Hoberek notes, this scene allegorizes "the simultaneously racially hybrid and superficially whitewashed nature of American history" (62). Like Hoberek, many scholars observe the paint mixing scene as a compelling depiction of white supremacy in the novel, but it is worth recognizing the implications of the narrator's blunder as an accidental foray into the kind of sabotage that will become his modus operandi by the novel's end. Without proper training on what he is putting into the paint, the narrator accidently refills the black emulsifier with paint remover, ruining a large order. By cutting the white paint with paint remover rather than emulsifier, the narrator destabilizes the chemical structure of the paint and turns it into an off-gray muck that cannot solidify. As a signal of things to come, Ellison highlights the fragility of the white superstructure when confronted by a Black absence: not a death, but a conscious removal, a becoming apart from. At this time, however, the narrator is oblivious to his power, still desperate to fit in as a model minority.[65]

Shorthanded at the factory due to a strike, the narrator is sent down to the basement to assist Brockway—one of the few permanent Black employees of the factory. Like a vision of the narrator's future self, Brockway represents the servant who has weaponized his servitude to consolidate power and punish other Black workers he perceives as a threat to his token place within the factory. As Brockway warns the narrator upon their meeting, "Lucius Brockway not

[65] Luke Sayers explains that up to the factory explosion, the narrator's primary means of seeking acceptance is to pattern himself on those around him. While this is more apparent in earlier scenes with professional aspirational figures like Bledsoe, it is true even with Brockway (345). While the narrator cannot help mocking Brockway to some extent while working with him, he is nevertheless eager to appear amenable and loyal to the hostile old man.

only intends to protect hisself, he *knows how* to do it" (Ellison, *Invisible* 209). As such, he is both an omen for the invisible man's potential future and an inversion of what the narrator will eventually become: an underground sycophant ready to sacrifice his life to ensure the steady going of the capitalist machine overhead. He is the black emulsifier manifest in human form. It is little surprise then that he is in charge of producing the "guts" of the paint that will be mixed with color above, a responsibility he takes deadly seriously (214). Like Yank in Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922), Brockway celebrates his capacity to work tirelessly—"*We the machines inside the machine*," Brockway rejoices—evoking the same kind of futurist rhetoric Yank does in O'Neill's play to champion his power to toil endlessly under grueling conditions as an admirable quality. And like Yank, Brockway fails to understand that he is more slave than master. Marc Singer notes in his reading of the scene that Brockway's celebration of his mechanization constitutes a submission to the "mechanized fate" that envisions time and history as a fixed clockwork of actions (398). Such an understanding of life refuses the possibility of change, or rather envisions change as a deterioration of the present condition, futurity a slow degeneration. This conception of progress ensures the continued exploitation of the workers by the paint company and makes Brockway hostile towards anyone he perceives as inimical to the preservation of the status quo. This is represented by Brockway's misinterpretation of the factory's parasitic exploitation of his skills as a chemist, which he mistakes for mutualism. Brockway's expertise, formed over decades of service to the factory makes him an irreplaceable part of the machine works, one of those old men, the narrator explains, that "had been employed at the beginning, before any records were kept" (211). And while this has solidified Brockway's employment at the factory, Brockway refuses to leverage his power to enact any change. In fact, Brockway actively opposes unionization efforts, explaining to the narrator that such

insubordination is “like we was to bite the hand of the man who teached us to bathe in the bathtub” (228). embodying the racialist messaging that Black civility is the product of white paternalism, Brockway’s comment attributes his labor prowess to the gracious intervention of the white employer, Mr. Sparland, who has, in reality, repeatedly tried to excise Brockway from the factory by sending white engineers down to learn his secrets. Thus, Brockway’s antagonism toward other workers serves the interests of the company by ensuring that the prime producer for paint production remains committed even if other workers decide to strike. Being fully indoctrinated into his role as devoted servant, Brockway only requires a little pandering to remain obedient to the factory interests.

When Brockway sabotages the paint works in an effort to kill the invisible man, who he assumes to be a union spy, he enacts the kind of self-sacrificial devotion the Brotherhood hopes to engender in the invisible man after his indoctrination into their organization. Representative of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), the Brotherhood is a radical group that discovers the invisible man after he improvises a protest against the eviction of an elderly Black couple in New York City. Impressed with his oratory, the Brotherhood hires the invisible man to be their Harlem representative and modifies him to fit into their ideological apparatus. Given a new name, new clothes, and a radical education, the invisible man once again becomes a student and servant to white interests. While Ellison “denied that the Brotherhood is the CP” in interviews following the publication of *Invisible Man*, Barbara Foley’s *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison’s* Invisible Man (2010) shows that Ellison clearly intended to submit the CPUSA “to critical scrutiny” (238).[66] The most telling characteristic of this fact is

[66] For a full account of Barbara Foley’s analysis, see chapter six of *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison’s* Invisible Man (2010). Broadly, it appears that Ellison worked to reverse some of the initial nuances he created for the Brotherhood while drafting, making the Brotherhood characters less sympathetic, more robotic, and tyrannical, and their worldview less revelatory to the invisible man’s self-actualization.

the Brotherhood's emphatic devotion to "the scientific approach," which regiments their entire approach to political organizing (Ellison, *Invisible* 350). After the invisible man's first speech, the Brotherhood members in attendance are horrified by his folkish verve and insist upon his being trained to "speak scientifically" (351). Only then will he be capable of delivering speeches in a manner to preserve the "scientific tranquility" necessary to avoid any true radical change (351). By satirizing leftist writer's fixation on realism, Ellison makes a bold claim—reminiscent of Wright's criticisms of communism in *Native Son* (1940)—against an organization that was at the time considered the political and intellectual answer to capitalism. However, in *Invisible Man*, the Brotherhood represents the apex of exploitative consumption of Black labor power, as its utopian veneer of communalism, equality, and liberation belies its explicitly codified racial hierarchy, which classifies both the invisible man and the Black community of Harlem as grist for its political mill. Like Norton and Emerson, the Brotherhood views the invisible man as hired help in service to their ontological becoming, an oratory automaton "hired to talk" not to think (470). Thus, the invisible man's work for the Brotherhood is no more a means of expression than dictation, and the invisible man is once again conditioned to labor for the white cause. What is particularly pernicious about the invisible man's work under the Brotherhood as compared to the university is that it presents itself as an avowed liberatory counter culturalism explicitly designed to inspire widespread self-actualizing, his work in service to the eminent realization of a kind of mass ontological event that would set in motion a revolutionary codification of Black humanity. However, this utopian emergence is in reality a dystopian plot to destabilize the Black community of Harlem when the Brotherhood's manipulation and abandonment of Harlem sets off a riot capable of razing the community to the ground.

This moment of destruction presents an ambivalent resolution to the novel, as the Harlem riot suggests an apocalyptic unmaking of the world that neither destroys the present white superstructure nor promises an opening for a new Black awakening. Like *The Man Who Lived Underground*, which concedes that Fred Daniel's reckoning with his faith in work and capitalism is too little too late as the bombs rain down upon the city behind him, *Invisible Man* closes on a cataclysmic event that promises nothing new beneath the ruins. While the invisible man wants to believe that the destruction of Harlem will reset the clock to what Mark Fisher defines as a "year zero" in which "a space has been cleared for a new anti-capitalism to emerge which is not necessarily tied to the old language or traditions," his odyssey through the chaos and violence of the night curdles any such optimism (78). There is in the Harlemite's repossession of property a semblance of reclamation—the workers taking back, so to speak, the *products* of their exploitation—but these gestures of revolution only serve to reinscribe the old capitalist habits anew. This is best captured in one man's use of his cotton sack, brought with him during his migration from the south, to amass a large quantity of stolen goods. The sack, a synecdoche of American slavery and Jim Crow oppression, becomes a tool for mass reclamation as he stuffs it full of consumer goods. In this inversion, the object of exploitative labor becomes one of entrepreneurship: "after tonight he'll need him a warehouse for all the stuff he's got" (Ellison, *Invisible* 540). And yet, what he chooses to loot are new work shirts, an extra-legal acquisition that signals the ideological preeminence of these oppressive labor systems (538). Similarly, when the man, named Dupre, enlists the invisible man to help his group set fire to a tenement building, their ire is expressly aimless. When the invisible man asks one of the group members where they are going, the man responds, "where? Hell, man. Everywhere. We git to moving, no telling where we might go" (538). Moreso, their destruction of the building results in the same kind of

displacement and dispossession that the invisible man witnessed at the eviction earlier in the novel. As the men prepare to enter the building and spread kerosene throughout, a pregnant woman pleads with them to stop. “Please, Dupre,” the expectant mother begs, “*please*. You know my time’s almost here . . . you *know* it is. if you do it now, where am I going to go?” (546). This collective disfunction underpins what Thomas Heise recognizes as the grave misgivings of the novel: “The novel disavows the black underclass uprising as a viable method of contravening the Fordist city’s racial exclusions and economic exploitations, seeing in its mass action an unruly crowd hell-bent on breaking windows” (159). All, it dreadfully seems, winds back on itself like a Kafkaesque nightmare of self-consumption; there is little one can do to override the failsafe set in place to ensure white supremacy presses on. The riot itself underscores the tragedy of this failed revolution: the Harlemites set fire to *their* world, not that of their white oppressors. The one consoling factor, of course, is the invisible man himself, who escapes the tumult of self-immolation through the open manhole into the underground.

The underground that the narrator ends up in is the true zone outside of history. This place is dimensionless and timeless, a space in which the logics of capitalism mean nothing. The only measurable quantities are emotional and intellectual: the corporeal (material) senses are temporarily made meaningless, and with their nullification the concepts of success, productivity, and efficiency spiral out into inconceivability. At long last, the invisible man is told to rest: “something seemed to say, ‘That’s enough, don’t kill yourself. You’ve run enough, you’re through with them at last’” (568). However, the invisible man’s rest is not rejuvenating, as it besets him with nightmares about the systems of control aboveground. In the dream the invisible man finally finds the power to shout down the demands of all those who worked tirelessly to keep him running. As an army of oppressors—including Jack, Emerson, Bledose, Norton, and

Ras—pin the invisible man down, demanding his return to their control, he refuses: "'No,' I said. 'I'm through with all your illusions and lies, I'm through running'" (569). His resistance is met with an act of generational violence, as Jack castrates the invisible man as payment for his awakening. Even if he were to return, he knows that he could no longer connect to those from his "old life": "No, I couldn't return to Mary's, or to the campus, or to the Brotherhood, or home. I could only move ahead or stay here, underground" (571). What the invisible man comes to believe is that all Black progress is the product, by its enforced sublimation of white supremacy, of white permissiveness. The United States is so fundamentally governed by white authority that any act of self-assertion—whether revolutionary, like the Harlem riot, or regressive, like Clifton's Sambo dolls—feels programmatically determined. Thus, the conclusion is not simply a temporary departure from society, but, as the narrator makes clear, a departure from history all together.

Like so much in the novel, resolutions do not come easily, and the invisible man resists clean interpretation: is he happy in his cellar home? Does he *really* believe that what he is doing is revolutionary? Ellison, or perhaps the invisible man, fumbles his culmination: "so," he tells us with a shrug, "I've remained in the hole" (575). While the invisible man determines that he no longer abides by the ethos of "hard work and progress and action" that motivated his earlier self, he fails to explicate a cogent philosophy of change (576). More than anywhere else in the novel, the epilogue seems to dissolve into fairly glib assertion about the power of diversity: "diversity is the word," the invisible man firmly asserts, "America is woven of many strands" (577). Like *The Man Who Lived Underground*, *Invisible Man* ends with its protagonist's decision to leave the underground to disseminate his newfound knowledge above. However, while Fred believes that his personal revelations can translate to social revolution above, the invisible man seems less

sure. Or, perhaps like his grandfather before him, the invisible man is playing coy, determined now to emerge a spy amongst his enemy, ready to exploit his invisibility to "give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties" (580-81). In contrast to Fred, whose innocence led him to believe that his knowledge would be welcomed by the white system that had oppressed him, invisible man knows to communicate "on the lower frequencies," understanding that his message can reach others through their shared desire for change (581).

From Mule to Muck: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison mince no words concerning their feelings toward *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In Wright's 1937 review of the novel for *New Masses*, he attests that "it is difficult to evaluate . . . Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. . . . not because there is an esoteric meaning hidden or implied," but because it possesses neither "a basic idea or theme that lends itself to significant interpretation" (22). Four years later, Ellison reiterates Wright's assessment by criticizing Hurston for retaining "the blight of calculated burlesque that has marred most of her writing" ("Recent" 24). Like Wright, who charges Hurston of minstrelsy, Ellison accuses her of writing to appease a white audience and concludes that *Their Eyes* does "nothing" for "Negro fiction."[67] However, it is Wright's closing verdict on Hurston that proves the most striking and relevant to my discussion. "The sensory sweep of her

[67] It is frustrating and hypocritical to read Ellison's portrayal of Hurston as, essentially, an "Uncle Tom" considering Ellison's well documented obsession with white writers and self-conscious effort to recast himself as a politically moderate novelist while writing *Invisible Man* to improve its appeal to a white audience. Ellison's critique is especially flummoxing considering he only lists white writers—James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, and Ernest Hemingway—when bemoaning Black authors' lack of engagement with "technical experimentation" ("Recent" 22). A modern reader should be suspicious of Ellison's assessment of Hurston, considering he completely ignores Hurston's involvement in chronicling African American folklore, which he posits as a glaring omission in 1920s Black fiction. Not only is folklore central to Hurston's fiction, but it constitutes a significant portion of her ethnographic research, including her time with the WPA as an ethnographer in Florida and Haiti. For more on Ellison's shift from radical to more moderate politics in his writing, see Arnold Rampersad's *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (2007) and Barbara Foley's *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's* Invisible Man (2010).

novel," Wright dictates, "carries no theme, no message, *no thought*" (25; emphasis added). However, contrary to Wright's assessment, the novel is nothing if it is not a treatise on the failures, brutality, corruption, and putrefaction of capitalist productivism, especially as it relates to white hegemony and Black assimilation. Jodie, Janie's second husband, and the most fully assimilated Black capitalist character in the novel, serves as a cautionary tale to readers of the destructive potential of sublimating oneself to the mania of work. As such, Wright's cruel misreading reifies the misogyny that Hurston captures in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as it embodies the kind of chauvinism that Janie, the novel's protagonist, rails against on her journey of self-actualization. One might hear in Wright's condemnation the voice of Joe Stark, Janie's second husband, telling Janie that "somebody got to think for women and chillum and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don't think none theirselves" (Hurston, *Their* 71). Joe's reductive assessment of women in general and Janie in particular affirms what Nanny, Janie's grandmother, warns Janie about as a young girl concerning the place of Black women in the world: while Black men are the servants of white men, Nanny explains, Black women are "de mule[s] uh de world" (14). Nanny's assertion about Black women's position in the world points up what Hurston recognizes as the particular complex of oppressive forces set against Black women in America. More than misogyny or racism in and of themselves, Black women in Hurston's novel are confronted with a totalizing dehumanization that perceives them as intrinsically unhuman. For Hurston, to be a woman is to be treated as a creature, like the mule, born and bred to work.

Understood as a mule, Janie can be both functionally defined and passively ignored. This reduces her to an object of manipulation, a thing that can be alchemized to fit whatever need the men in her life desire. Importantly, all of these needs concern Janie's functionality as a piece of

labor-saving machinery, not as a wife, lover, or mother. As Todd McGowan defines in his Marxist reading of the novel, this revolves around Janie's various husbands' economic desires, which manifest in distinct forms across the novel. Each takes on the ethos of a different capitalist epoch, with Logan Killicks embodying competitive capitalism, Joe Starks representing monopoly capitalism, and Tea Cake expressing a form of late-stage capitalism that "eschews the work ethic and rigid organization of earlier times, and devotes itself entirely to immediate gratification" (112, 119). While, as I will show, Tea Cake's "playful" capitalism provides Janie with a space in which to fully form herself, it nonetheless insists upon an objectification that bends her toward Tea Cake's whims. Thus, according to Patricia Hill Collins, the mule becomes a symbol for women's place as both "living machines and . . . part of the scenery" (45). In their dual otherness of object and ornament, Black women can be brutalized through a simultaneous over-exertion and neglect of the body that pays little mind to the psychological suffering inflicted by such a lack of existential autonomy. Joshua Bennett, in his incisive study of the mule in *Their Eyes*, observes that "muleness is inextricably linked to this sort of routine violation: the taken-for-granted suffering that occurs beyond the power or purview of social accountability" (117). As a result, the mule signals in the novel the long history of racialism used to justify slavery, as Sharon Davie identifies: "On the great chain of being constituted by the received white wisdom of the day, blacks seemed to slide into the category of animal—a convenient justification for owning them" (449). In the context of the novel, this represents a disturbing regression on the part of the men, who fail to recognize or care about their duplicitous adoption of white supremacist violence.

However, Hurston is not merely interested in depicting the trauma of Janie's muleness.

Rather, *Their Eyes* insists upon a fourth way of indefiniteness represented by the Muck and Janie's reimaging of work as a passive concern associated with community building and self-actualization apart from economics of power and social standing. In the words of Barbara Johnson, "there is no point of view from which the universal characteristics of the human, or of the woman, or of the black woman, or even of Zora Neale Hurston, can be selected and totalized. Unification and simplification are fantasies of domination, not understanding" (170). As a result, the novel recognizes muleness as a means of escape as much as a means of control, a heterogeneous position that represents both "a site of unspoken and unspeakable violence" and "political possibility, of radical imagination set free by misrecognition" (Bennett 117). As McGowan observes in his analysis of Janie's relationship with her first husband, Killick: "By forcing Janie into the role of the mule, Logan shatters Janie's imaginary identification: he desecrates the pear tree, Janie's ideal of love and marriage. This alienation, however, marks Janie's birth as subject, her full entry into the symbolic order" (112).

The novel is organized as a series of coming-to-consciousness moments, in which Janie gains a greater sense of self as she comes to recognize her total distaste for work as a means of upward mobility. Janie's progressive identity formation stands in opposition to "bourgeois notions of progress . . . and of the Protestant work ethic" that breaks from the history of labor and gender expectations (Gates 197). "Rather," Merinda Simmons suggests, "her story has more to do with a journey than with a single epiphany," arising "out of her own displacement" and ending "likewise in flux" (53, 50). Janie's choice to leave the comfort of Eatonville for the hard labor of the muck departs from the tradition of progression and marks her ascendancy to a new realm of thought outside of the capitalist conception of success. What Janie's construction of events shows us is that progress should not be measured by sequential milestones but by

perceptual thinking. Or, rather, what Janie exposes is the reality that all events, myths, laws, rules, aspirations are the product of perception, that achievements or failures are the product of a system that has been crafted and made real by the authority of a white male capitalist hegemony and perpetuated by a Black male elite insistent upon its adoption by Black communities. The men in Janie's life believe in its myths, prescribe to its logic, and abide by its rules to codify their aspirations as socially enviable modes of thriving. However, as Janie's narrative shows, these modes of thriving rely on wanton exploitation, including of those within their community, and especially women. Thus, Janie's journey is a matter of unbecoming, achieving a state of imaginative detachment uninhibited by the present state of things. In doing this, Janie reckons with what David Graeber defines as "the ultimate, hidden truth of the world": "that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently" (*Utopia* 89). In what is traditionally understood to be a state of discomfort—that unstructured state that Joe hurls himself against in his efforts to modernize and civilize Eatonville into "de metropolis uh de state" (Hurston, *Their* 42)—Janie finds hope for an unbecoming that is not cataclysmic like those ruptures that mark the ends to both Wright's and Ellison's novels. Rather, for Janie, the horizon of possibility is cleared for envisioning a new mode of living unburdened from the principles of capitalism that demand the constant laboring for upward progress and cultivation for consumption. While Janie never arrives at a definitive answer to the issues of work—in fact, much of Janie's pleasure in the muck comes from her work—she does persistently reject the ethics of productivism that drive the men in her life to death. In this sense, Janie's indeterminacy marks a significant narrative act of rebellion against a resolution that the novel is expected to *work* toward and arrive at by its final page. By celebrating what is often interpreted as apathy, a

waywardness that signals a lack of ambition, Janie's story invites readers to consider the power inherent in flexibility uninhibited by aspirational rigidity.

As the first obstacle in Janie's journey of self-actualization, Logan Killicks represents the most explicit form of labor exploitation. Evoking the strictures of Jim Crow subsistence farming, Killicks envisions Janie as a mule to be fed and housed in exchange for a day's work. While Killicks initially stoops to kiss Janie's feet as his new bride, the honeymoon phase, as Nanny warns, is fleeting, and soon Killicks "straightens up" and endeavors to enforce a work relationship with Janie that demands she work "lak ah man" (23, 26). Although the marriage is baldly transactional, Nanny insists that such circumstances necessitate Janie's full participation, as Killicks' proposition represents the ideal economic circumstances: "If you don't want him, you sho oughta," Nanny scolds Janie (23). "Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road and . . . Lawd have mussy! Dat's just whut's got us uh pullin' and uh haulin' and sweatin' and doin' from can't see in de mornin' till can't see at night. Dat's how come de ole folks say dat bein' uh fool don't kill nobody. It jus' makes you sweat" (23). While Nanny intends to shame Jannie into appreciating her circumstances, Nanny unwittingly articulates the paradox of the whole situation, as the "haulin' and sweatin' and doin'" proceeds regardless of what Killicks has accumulated. No amount of wealth will stop Killicks from working and from working Janie. In particular, because Janie must produce as both farm hand and homemaker, the prospect of enjoying what she has seems limited to an abstract satisfaction with possession in and of itself, as Janie would have little time or reason to enjoy agrarian land designated for work. Rather, Janie confesses, "Ah could throw ten acres of it over the fence every day and never look back to see where it fell. Ah feel de same way 'bout Mr. Killicks too" (23-24). Jannie's summation of her feelings toward Killicks' land and their marriage registers the

fact that Killicks' evocation of the impersonal, business relationship submits Janie to an ungendering that transforms her "*at the level of species*" into an unhuman other, "forcibly removed from the province of the human and placed elsewhere" (Bennett 122). This elsewhere, under Killicks authority, is "wherever Ah need yuh," making Janie a creature of "no particular place" (Hurston, *Their* 31). Killicks assumes that this kind of psychological control will ensure Janie's submission to his order, which places her in the field plowing for a large potato haul later in the year.

However, this does not produce Killicks' desired effect of "breaking" Janie's resistant spirit; rather, it signals an awakening in her: "She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (25). As McGowan observes, "by forcing Janie into the role of the mule, Logan shatters Janie's imaginary identification: he desecrates the pear tree, Janie's ideal of love and marriage" (112). This awakening proves a significant moment for Janie to form subjecthood through loss. This triggers an important dissociation from the material world, as Janie no longer vests her emotional yearnings in objects of desire—real or imagined. While Janie was always unconsciously anti-capitalist in her disinterest in material wealth, her reckoning with the cold realities of Killicks' loveless productivism solidifies her feelings into a directed gaze "over the gate" and "up the road towards way off," a nowhere-in-particular that symbolizes the promise of happiness she has yet to obtain (25).

This gaze leads her to Joe Starks, an ambitious man determined to make a "big voice" of himself by building up an all-Black community (28). This dream is realized in Eatonville, where Joe becomes mayor, postmaster, general store owner, and landlord to the other people of the town. A man with "a bow-down command in his face," the people of Eatonville quickly fall in line behind Joe on his journey of self-aggrandizement, as they see Joe as an aspirational figure

worthy of their leadership (47). In writing about Janie's relationship with Joe Starks, McGowan asserts that "Joe Starks does not dominate Janie by forcing her to labor (as Logan does) but by turning her into a thing, transforming her into his commodity" (113). This, McGowan contends, follows from Joe's disinterest in utilizing Janie as a means of production, as Killicks did, and rather stems from his possessiveness over Janie as an object of fetishization. This is certainly Joe's expressed interest in Janie initially. During their first meeting, Joe protests the idea of Janie working the fields: "You behind a plow! You ain't got no mo' business wid uh plow than uh hog is got wid uh holiday! . . . A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for you" (29). Alessandra Albano, reading the novel alongside Hurston's anthropological work in *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938), contends that Joe envisions Janie as his "goddess" to be "honored" and pampered (30). Joe's promise of "no mo' business" is, understandably, appealing to Janie, as Joe's fawning over her suggests a life of leisure in which she would no longer be expected to work. While Janie is certainly drawn to the idea of being a kept woman, I would contest that Janie's draw to Joe has more to do with her desire to be seen, which Joe initially seems to do. However, Joe and Janie's marriage quickly dissolves into an employer/employee dynamic. While Janie is not treated like a "mule" for agrarian labor as she was with Killicks, she is by no means set up as a "high-society woman," as Simmons claims (53). In fact, it is quite the opposite. After the honeymoon phase, Joe is quick to turn Janie from his "goddess" into his clerk, obligated by gender expectations to work at his bidding. Once Joe builds the general store, Janie is set to work providing him a lifetime of free labor.

Once Janie begins to work in the store, Joe is quick to dehumanize her through the arbitrary enforcement of rules that set her apart from the other people of the community. This

begins with the head-rag, which Joe requires Janie to wear while working in the store in an effort to avert the gaze of the other men in town who Joe frequently catches "figuratively wallowing in it as she went about things in the store" (55). Born of a jealous impulse in Joe, the head-rag also evokes the expectations of Black domestics to wear uniforms while working in white homes as a means of codifying the "deference relationship" between employee and employer (Hill Collins 57). By requiring Janie to wear her hair up, Joe establishes a visual language that signals Janie's lowered status, letting the community know that she is his *and* that she is theirs. As such, Joe's desexing of Janie simultaneously suppresses her personhood, making her invisible to the other people in town. This is further enforced by Joe's spacial restrictions on Janie to the confines of the counter. Like the head-rag, this signals Janie's deference to Joe and reduces her to a purely functionary presence in the store. Janie begins to recognize this is a conscious strategy on Joe's part to isolate her from the community, as anytime one of the "big picture talkers were using a side of the world for a canvas, Joe would hustle her off inside the store to sell something." What is worse is that it "look like he took pleasure in doing it" (54). These estrangements enforce Janie's otherness from the community that leads to her complete collapse as a person. This is made most apparent when Joe falls sick and can no longer look over the store. Without the boss on site to observe Janie's performance, townspeople drop in to "ostentatiously [look] over whatever she was doing and went back to report to him at the house" (83). Interactions with other townspeople become transactional, something that leaves Janie with a constant "sick headache" (54). The calculator conversations that Janie holds with shoppers amounts to perfunctory shoptalk that provides little of the nourishing humanity that Janie desires. As a result, her life with Joe becomes a rote process—"every day had a store in it"—and Janie

becomes an assistant valued, and more often derided, for her (in)ability to aid Joe in his endeavors to accrue wealth and power within the community (51).

Joe's tactics prove effective, as Janie is ultimately deflated by his constant rulemaking. Rather than argue with Joe, Janie learns to agree "with her mouth" to avoid conflict (63). In her state of quiet resignation, Janie embodies a thing in so far as she is forced to live her life entirely "between her hat and her heels," which is to say not living much at all (76). In her state of emotional constraint, Janie lives as means of passing time until death, life as a worker in the store "a waste of life and time" (54). This wasting finally comes for Joe and gives Janie her opportunity to fly from the stranglehold of Eatonville and its capitalist mindset. With age, Joe's "prosperous-looking belly that used to thrust out so pugnaciously and intimidate folks" now "sagged like a load suspended from his loins" (77). While Joe has amassed a great deal of prosperity and power in Eatonville, it has taken its toll on his body and mind, turning him into a myopic figure incapable of seeing the damage he has caused to his marriage and his body. This myopia leads to Joe's death, a slow withering of his body that expresses his inner decay. Janie explains to Joe on his death bed, "you was so busy worshippin' de works of yo' own hands, and cuffin' folks around in their minds till you didn't see uh whole heap uh things yuh could have" (86). In addition to neglecting his health to the point that there would be no remedy for his illness, Joe's avarice also ensured a spiritual death through his neglect of Janie. While there is a semblance of resolution between Joe and Janie at his death, Joe dies in terror at the fact that all his work will be left behind. This is again represented by Joe's belly, which Janie notices has shrunk into a small paunch "huddled before him on the bed like some helpless thing seeking shelter" (85). Through Joe's shrunken deathbed form, Hurston depicts the necrotic effects of Joe's slavish devotion to work on both the body and mind. What is worse, is that this putridity is

contagious, a toxin capable of seeping into the soul of a community and manifesting a mass illness that spoils the human love into what Janie calls "mislove" (90). This mislove Janie presents as a defiance of a celestial beauty endowed in humanity that turns the "shine and . . . song" of god's original creation into a "tumbling mud-ball" to be "set in the market-place to sell" (90). In witnessing Joe's death and the response of the town to Janie's widowhood—a race amongst the men to claim Joe's forfeit businesses and property (Janie included)—Janie comes to believe that this reduction of the human spirit into a measure of labor power to be bought and sold marks an inescapable bastardization of life itself.

The arrival of Tea Cake and his recommendation that they move down to the muck of Southern Florida provides a new horizon on which Janie can set her sights and desires once again. Tea Cake represents a type of vagabond worker, always moving, and with little interest in the acquisition of wealth, material goods, or power. As an important distinction from Killicks or Joe, Tea Cake's arrival brings not work but play, as he invites Janie to a match of checkers, a game Joe forbid Janie to play. "Somebody wanted her to play," Janie rejoices as Tea Cake teaches her the rules of the game, "somebody thought it natural for her to play. That was even nice" (96). In addition, Tea Cake is quick to recognize Janie's intellect, complimenting for having "good meat on yo' head" (96). This, Laura Doyle observes, presents Tea Cake's desire for Janie as a twin respect for her as "a partner in play *and* work" (131). Tea Cake's twining of these opposed activities comes to define work with Tea Cake, as alluded to during their first meeting when Tea Cake injects role-play and fantasy into the otherwise tedious work of the store. "Evenin', Mis' Starks. Could yuh lemme have uh pound uh knuckle puddin' till Saturday? Ah'm shot uh pay yuh then." "You needs ten pounds," Janie retorts, "Ah'll let yuh have all Ah got and you needn't bother 'bout payin' it back" (98). Unsurprisingly, Janie's romance with Tea

Cake becomes a cause célèbre in Eatonville. Far from genuine concern for Janie's wellbeing, the men see their budding relationship as a direct threat to business opportunities. Telling on themselves, the men assess that Tea Cake must be "spendin' on her now in order tuh make her spend on him later," an opinion that Pheoby, Janie's only friend in town, concludes represent's the mens' "jealousy and malice. Some uh dem very mens wants tuh do whu dey claim deys skeered Tea Cake is doin'" (111). With the town against them, Janie decides that she and Tea Cake need to leave Eatonville. They choose to move to the everglades, which Tea Cake calls the Muck, to "start all over in Tea Cake's way" (114).

Janie's move to the Muck complicates my discussion of refusal of work, as work becomes a necessity for Tea Cake and Janie unlike it was for Janie in Eatonville. While Janie could essentially retire on the wealth Joe accrued during his life and the ongoing revenue of the general store if she chose to stay in Eatonville, living on the Muck necessitates Tea Cake become a day laborer. Indeed, more an economic necessity, Tea Cake insists that he and Janie live off of his income alone as a measure of his manhood: "Ah no need no assistance tuh help me feed mah woman. From now on, you gointuh eat whatever mah money can buy yuh and wear de same. When ah ain't got nothin' you don't git nothin'" (128). Furthermore, while Janie could remain a housewife and perform the work attendant with this position, she chooses to join Tea Cake on the muck picking beans. These decisions from both Tea Cake and Janie would suggest that they in fact are adherents to the ethics of work like Killicks or Joe without the ambition of accumulation or monopolization that drives the previous husbands, respectively. However, work on the muck takes on a purpose beyond the purely economic, encompassing a communal connectivity and frivolity that promises a new interpretation of work as a purely subsistence activity. As Tea Cake explains to Janie, "Folks don't do nothin' down dere but make money and

fun and foolishness" (128). "In other words," Doyle summates, "wages are neither the telos nor the centre of this world. Wage work enables the pleasure of music, games, food and drink, and remains subordinate to them" (132). Like in Howells' Altruria, work is done on the muck to provide base needs, and community is elevated to provide a spiritual nourishment. As Gregory Phipps explain, "the Everglades is a place defined by interpersonal connections that form in lieu of permanent links to institutions and infrastructures" (169). The muck is a zone outside the boundaries of society, and thus it resists the fixity and stagnation of Eatonville. By actively embracing liminality, unlike the Eatonville citizenry who possess a furious desire for fixity, the residents of the muck embody the nowhereness that Janie longed for while looking over the gate of Killicks' 60 acres. It is, perhaps, their nomadic existence that compels them to bond closely with others as a means of forming a new connectivity that withstands the temperamentality of wage labor.

As a result, work is supplanted by fun on the hierarchy of importance. When Janie joins Tea Cake on the muck to pick beans, "romping and playing . . . behind the boss's back" suffuse the workday with pleasurable disorder, drawing the community together under the banner of disobedient amusement (133). This joyful refusal to both conform to the ethics of capitalism and to serve with solemn attention to the boss' profit margins rejuvenates Janie and inducts her into a "people in motion—singing, talking, playing—with concern for their community as well as their individual welfare" (Patterson 122). This new telos directly contradicts the "new industrial consciousness" that was presented as the ideal mode of modern Black thinking, contesting such logic of rigidity and uniformity with a messy frivolity that opens up new, meaningful avenues to self-discovery and expression (Lawrie 52). What is more, Janie's "new rollicking consciousness" has the power to transpose the communal loci of power. Unlike Eatonville, communalism on the

muck centers on the home rather than the general store, a relocation that disconnects community from work and diffuses the regulatory power of inclusivity that was previously wielded like a cudgel by Joe back to the people. “The house was full of people every night,” Janie tells us, “to hear Tea Cake pick the box . . . to talk and tell stories . . . [and] to get into whatever game was going on or might go on” (Hurston, *Their* 133). The hospitality of the home also inducts previously isolated members of the broader working community. Through Janie and Tea Cake’s friendship with the Bahaman workers, who previously isolated themselves for fear of being mocked for their traditions, the home becomes a sight of cross-cultural unification and allyship that propagates cultural sharing and celebration (154). Most importantly for Janie’s development, the home permits everyone to participate in the fun, including Janie, who grows expansive under the healthful rays of love and acceptance the muck residences lavish on her. What Janie finally comes to recognize, a thing that flitted across her consciousness at Joe’s death but becomes whole under the tutelage of the muck, is that life is transient and thus demands our full attention.

This is not to say that the muck is a post-work paradise or a permanent source of joy. If it was, Janie’s revelations would be predicated on place not personhood. As such, tragedy defines her last days on the muck and with Tea Cake. Although numerous warnings are given, both by the natural world and the Seminole tribe that lives in the area, that Lake Okechobee will soon flood, Tea Cake insists that they stay to work under the aegis of “de bossman” and the fact that “de white folks ain’t gone nowhere” (156). While Tea Cake’s insistence to stay is not based on greed per se, it is a naïve interpretation of signs that signals his over-reliance on white intuition, the meaning of market values, and a selfish desire to strain the pleasures of the muck longer than possible. Rather than read the signs, Tea Cake looks away: “Still a blue sky and fair weather. Beans running fine and prices good, so the Indians could be, *must* be, wrong. You couldn’t have

a hurricane when you're making seven and eight dollars a day picking beans" (155). This market logic echoes Joe's and Killicks' mentalities toward work and dooms Tea Cake in the end. In Tea Cake's refusal to admit that an end to the fun is on the horizon, he falls victim to the "good-life fantasies" that Berlant warns operate as the primary delusion of cruel optimism (2). By overstaying on the muck, Janie and Tea Cake fall victim to the flood, which decimates the area, leads to Tea Cake contracting rabies through a dog bite, and returns them to a state forced labor. After the flood, Tea Cake and the other remaining Black men in the area are set to work recovering and burying the dead. Like in *The Man Who Lived Underground*, work and death after the flood become intimately intwined, like a "recapitulation," Doyle notes, of the "traumatic water passage followed by compulsory labour" of "Atlantic world slavery" (133). In the end, Janie is forced to kill Tea Cake in self-defense and return to Eatonville to live out her days.

Conclusion

Like Fred Daniels and the invisible man, Janie feels a need to come back to the aboveground of Eatonville. Back home, Janie concludes her journey with the humble task of cultivating her garden in remembrance of Tea Cake. Janie explains to Pheoby that the only possession that she brought with her from the muck was a "package of garden seeds that Tea Cake had bought to plant" (191). These seeds represent a job deferred—a "wish . . . forever on the horizon"—for Tea Cake, who became too ill to plant them (1). However, Janie prizes the garden as a site of remembrance where the material becomes meaningless. For Janie, the productive power of the garden will serve no practical purpose accept to extend her message outward to the broader community of Eatonville. Janie, who has "done been tuh de horizon and back," has borne witness to the folly of men who set their sights on and drudge their lives away

for a chance to pluck a ship from the chimeric vista of the capitalist imaginary (191). What Janie has learned is that there are no ships on the horizon. Those ships, which the male gazer in the novel's opening passages looks upon with anticipation, are fantasies—American Dreams deferred—fabricated to, in the words of the invisible man's grandfather, "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running" (Ellison, *Invisible* 33). Janie is done running. Now, she sets her sights on sharing, which she starts by retelling her story to Pheoby. It appears to have Janie's desired effect, as Pheoby exclaims, "Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listening' tuh you, Janie" (192). Janie story has inspired Pheoby to seek out satisfaction with her life rather than simply gripe about its absence: "Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin' wid him after this," Pheoby determines, ready to embrace fun alongside the work that she is expected to perform. Importantly, Janie insists that Pheoby share her story with the gossipers in town, hopeful that her experience will show them that "love ain't somethin' lak uh grindstone" (191). Unlike Wright, who presents a skeptical conclusion in his novel, suggesting that Fred Daniels' revelation is an isolated incident, Hurston—like Ellison—recognizes the power of her story to change the minds of those who read it.

And yet, while Hurston's novel offers an optimistic message of unity and growth, she does so in the wake of a disaster that complicates efforts to derive a definitively positivist conclusion from her text. In fact, all three novels end cataclysmically (either through a natural disaster as in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, or a man-made disaster like that depicted in Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* and Ellison's *Invisible Man*), with eruptive finales that warn of a closing off rather than an opening up of dialogue. It seems as if these novelists fear that there will forever remain an irreconcilability between their characters' enlightenment and the ever-present threat to these revelations in the form of social sterility.

While their characters discover an inner meaning outside the confines of a society organized around capitalism, the society remains. This is particularly prominent in Hurston's novel in the death of Teacake, who ultimately succumbs to the infectious compulsion to accumulate more wealth even as he teaches Janie to rethink work as a means of communal pleasure. As I move into my conclusion, I want to focus on the infectiousness of the American work narrative as I look to the modern moment in Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018). In Ma's exploration of the modern American work malaise, work is embraced as a welcome escape from the hollowness of life under late-stage capitalism. In this closing analysis, I move my analysis of work in literature to the present as a means of linking these nineteenth and twentieth century texts to ongoing anxieties around work's function in American life.

Conclusion: It's the End of the World as We Know it, and I'm Going to Work: Laboring Through the Late Capitalist Apocalypse in Ling Ma's *Severance*

More than a century on from Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888) we are still grappling with the same core issue concerning work. Long after the machine systems and automated labor that harried the nerves of twentieth-century workers were offshored to developing countries—submitting a whole new working class to the stultifying traumas of mass industry—it seems that American workers are as much, if not more, slaves to their work as they were then. Like a zombie dream, slouching onward through history, the "good-life fantasy" that Lauren Berlant warns is at the center of work's cruel optimism remains. What is perhaps more distressing is that this fantasy of the good life that once busied the minds of workers with plans for what they might do *after* the work was over has become an expectation of work itself: What was once a job or career, Derek Thompson observes, has become a calling ("Why"). This new religiosity—dubbed workism—preaches that the central value of work is the work itself; no longer merely a matter of economic necessity, work under workism becomes "the centerpiece of one's identity and life's purpose" ("Workism"). In this new era of transcendental employment, Sarah Jaffe explains, "we've been told that work itself is supposed to bring us fulfillment, pleasure, meaning, even joy. We're supposed to work for the love of it" (Jaffe 2).

In concluding my dissertation, I want to make a claim for a slightly amended interpretation of Thompson's "workism." As my dissertation has argued, work in America has long held court as *the* existential evocation of the self. Arguably, since John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630), work has been understood along theological grounds. And while I agree with Thompson and Jaffe's assessment that work has taken on a new zealousness in the twenty-first century, I contend that our devotion comes not from a love of work but from a

reverence for its numbing power on the psyche, its capacity to delude the individual into believing they have constituted a spiritual and material whole. To do this, I will analyze Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018). Set during a fictional pandemic caused by a highly infectious fungal outbreak that turns people into zombie-like automatons stuck in a slow degeneration of behavioral cycles, such as work actions, until they die, the novel follows Candace Chen as she navigates the end of the world with a small group of survivors on a journey to what their group leader calls "the facility" with hopes of preserving humanity. Through flashbacks, the novel depicts Candace's post-grad days in New York City as an unemployed hipster and her time working as a product coordinator for a multi-national book publishing company named Spectra, a job that Candace stays at long after New York City has been abandoned to fulfill a lucrative contract. While the novel's inclusion of a global pandemic hit a nerve with readers discovering it during the coronavirus pandemic, in interviews Ma details how work troubles inspired her initial writing on the story and work-related anxieties led to its development into a fully formed novel. Started as a short story after Ma was laid off by a company in the process of downsizing, Ma explains that she recognized the story would become a novel "around the time that Candace . . . starts talking about work . . . There was a lot of anger I could feel there that was probably reflective of my own situation at the time."

For Candace, work represents a simultaneous act of self-delusion and self-destruction, a death drive prized for its capacity to occupy time and simulate a sense of purpose. This urge to repress thought through work becomes more desirable when Candace learns that she is pregnant, a revelation that leads her to take the dangerous but high paying contract to continue working for Spectra through the pandemic. While this choice signals Candace's desire to care for her child, the obvious health risks of the job and the transactional nature of this gesture of love signals a

lack of emotional connection with her future baby. Thus, and in distinction from early twentieth-century anxieties concerning automatism in mass industry, modern work embodies a state of living death in which routines provide a welcome suspension of consciousness as a means of shutting out the mundane brutality of a life without purpose. As such, Candace embodies T. May Stone's assessment that "Americans are ready to zombify themselves" (32). This is echoed in Aanchal Saraf's interpretation of the novel as "a post-apocalyptic confirmation that we'd sooner believe the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (13). In the face of fungal Armageddon, Candace actively *works* to condition herself into a state of catatonic routine as a guard against the emptiness she feels in her life, while simultaneously ensuring the continued existence of Spectra as a business entity. In this state of rote living, Candace is no more alive than the fevered, and like a zombie, whose "core characteristic has been absence, an intrinsic lack," Candace lacks an inner purpose (Stone 17) It is only when she accepts the painfulness of living that she comes to a sense of authentic self. Like *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) almost one hundred years before it, *Severance* challenges the precepts of work to propose an alternative humanity disconnected from the mores of productivism and the nihilism of capitalist realism; rather, the novel asks the reader to remain hopeful for the future and to recognize the power in action, not as objective measures of change but as modes of thinking that manifest individual purpose. This is represented by Candace's photography, which she abandons after getting her job at Spectra and picks up again during the pandemic, and later by her pregnancy.

While the zombie appears to be a well-worn trope of the twentieth century, especially as a cinematic figure of the rampant consumer culture of the 1980s, it has haunted the American consciousness since the late nineteenth century. According to Stone, the zombie first came to the U.S. through a nineteenth-century travelogue by Lafcadio Hearn titled, "The Country of the

Comers-Back" (1889) published in *Harper's Magazine*. The story exoticizes Haiti, presenting it as a cosmically horrifying far cry from the safety of the U.S. where the zombie represents "the covert presence of the irrational luring at the margins of everyday existence" (Stone 36). Later, during the U.S. occupation of Haiti in 1915, it was returning sailors, laden with stolen "religious paraphernalia," who reintroduced the concept to American culture (12). In the 1930s, Zora Neale Hurston would reanimate the zombie trope for American readers in her ethnographic study of Haitian culture, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938). In it, Hurston recounts her interactions with a supposed zombie, named Felicia Felix-Mentor. While, as Gary Totten observes in his analysis of Hurston's ethnographic work, Hurston's account of Haiti was treated with grave skepticism by reviewers, her interaction with the zombie provided an opportunity for Hurston to emphasize "the authority of her first-person methods and the information that she gathers through these methods" (121, 127). Regardless of the believability of Hurston's ethnography, her description of the zombie provides a cogent assessment of its horror. "Think of the fiendishness," she begs her reader, "to contemplate the probability of [a man's] resurrected body being dragged from the vault . . . and set to toiling ceaselessly . . . working like a beast" (181). In 1930s America, this conception of the walking dead was particularly pungent, as it captured the despair of "the burned-out souls standing in lines at soup kitchens or fruitlessly waiting in employment lines" (Dendle 46).

In *Severance* zombification is reimagined through Shen Fever, a fungal infection that slowly impairs brain function, starting with motor-skill deterioration and ending with "a fatal loss of consciousness" (Ma, *Severance* 19). In the final stages of Shen Fever, victims, called the fevered, move through a loop of rote behaviors, such as work motions, until they die. This reimaging of the zombie trope recalls the mechanized panic of expressionist theatre, where

portrayals of workers emphasized the mechanical repetition of labor actions as a means of emphasizing the rote nature of modern industrial work and its degenerative effects on the minds of the workers. As an important update for a twenty-first century zombie narrative, the fungal infection, occurs through the inhalation of fungal spores, a choice that emphasizes the passive nature of twenty-first century workers who stagnate behind a desk. Additionally, the infection's passive entrance and incubation in the body—initial symptoms are so mild that they appear as a common cold—signals the insidious ways late capitalism and its attendant pressures to work endlessly and spend exorbitantly metastasizes in the American psyche as the de facto social order. For Candace, Christopher Fan notes, "a white-collar office job . . . is initially an escape from the unfreedom of postcollege unemployment and precarity, yet it's ultimately a prison sentence that she oddly embraces. Rather than revolt . . . Candace finds comfort in it" (97). This manifests in her shifting understanding of her work from a generic "office job," a necessary means of subsistence, to a gateway to living (although, only by the standards of capitalist accumulation): "It was a delirious offer. . . . it meant I could take cabs all the time, without cramming into dirty train cars. It meant a larger apartment. It meant that I could afford for the baby. It meant that I could eventually take some time off to do other things. Take an extended maternity leave. Read more fiction. Take up photography again" (11, 217-18). It is this understanding of work as the only means of achieving affirmation and happiness that leads Candace to ultimately end things with Jonathan. After Jonathan attempts to convince Candace to flee New York with him to live a semi-nomadic life off the grid, Candace articulates to herself the nihilism of the modern working world, thinking: "you live your life idealistically. You think

it's possible to opt out of the system. . . . In this world, money is freedom. Opting out is not a real choice" (205-6).[68]

Candace's apathy toward life and its predestined enslavement to work compels her to submerge herself in the work routine as means of justifying her own existence. In Ma's reinvention of the zombie trope, Candace represents a willing sacrifice to the living death of rote work, often relishing the moment when she can descend into the numbing routine of corporate tasks. While she possesses the intellect to recognize the destructive power of such redundant living, she lacks the willpower to make any meaningful change. This seems, by and large, to be an autonomic response to moments of grief, which Candace refuses to process. As a reactionary means of self-preservation, Candace collapses herself into her work. When Candace ends her relationship with Jonathan, "I emptied myself, lost myself in the work. I got up. I went to work in the morning. I went home in the evening. I repeated the routine" (151). This self-inflicted zombification returns with regularity in the novel; as Stone observes, "I repeated the routine" "is the most common refrain in the novel" (156). Ma notes the predatory potential of Candace's behavior by highlighting its appeal to Spectra's upper management, which retains Candace in her position "because my output was prolific and they could task me with more and more production assignments. When I focused, a trait I exhibited at the beginning of my time there, I could be detail-oriented to the point of obsession" (16-17). In this system of relations between Candace's emotional state, her productivity, and her appeal as a productive member of her company, Ma

[68] Christopher Fan, in "Science Fictionality and Post-65 Asian American Literature" (2020), articulates the racial dynamics at play between Candace and Jonathan. Reading this scene as a depiction of "the contradiction between racial identity and economic subjectivity," Fan recognizes the "cishet white privilege" undergirding Jonathan's decision to leave New York and the pressures of "the perennially unresolved status of Chinese American racial form" as objects of labor that compels Candace's "convergence with the capitalist system" (97). For more on this, see Aanchal Saraf, Claire Gullander-Drolet, and Iana Robitaille.

recognizes the hurdles of imagining life beyond modern work, which preys upon and reinforces workers' duress in an endless loop of panic and imprisonment.[69]

However, the novel is not interested in the New Age atavisms that often come in response to outcries for an alternative to work under late capitalism. A faith in a pre-industrial lifestyle, which animates Jonathan's decision to leave the city, these ideologies presume that followers willing to give up the comforts of late capitalism will find solace in a back-to-basics existence. Defined as "romantic anticapitalism," Saraf explains, this form of reactionary pseudo-counterculturalism villainizes "abstract capitalism as the source of evil" while still participating in the market (17). By privileging "the qualitative over the quantitative," romantic anticapitalists appear outside the exploitative system of labor necessary to produce mass consumer goods. In the novel this is personified by Jonathan, who believes that both literal and philosophical flight from New York City holds the key to freeing himself from the rise-and-grind culture of the city. Eye-rollingly radical, Jonathan dodges the drudgery of nine-to-five living by subsisting off of corporate gig work. Like his underground living in New York, Jonathan's wish to leave the city for a quasi-nomadic life off the grid promises a more meaningful existence outside of labor and consumer systems. But, in reality, Candace recognizes, this mode of existing is no more meaningful than her corporate zombiism: "You think this is freedom but I still see the bare, painstakingly cheap way you live, the scrimping and saving, and that is not freedom either. You move in circumscribed circles. You move peripherally, on the margins of everything, pirating movies and eating dollar slices" (Ma, *Severance* 205-6).

[69] Candace shares her love of work with her mother, who neglects to form friendships when she immigrates to Salt Lake City from China when Candace is young. "Instead of trying to find new friends, Ruifang [Candace's mother] ignored her loneliness. She focused her efforts on finding a job" (173).

A similar faith in the rejuvenating power of nature motivates the survivors that Candace joins after leaving New York to believe that it is their environment—New York City—that produces the zombie mindset. They choose Chicago as the "even-keeled, prairie center of the Great Lakes region" as a pastoral space suited to "benefit our better natures" (Ma, *Severance* 5). This logic of rural tranquility is often evoked as the necessary antidote to the city-borne selfishness of crass capitalism and slave workaholism. Candace drily recounts, "we would set up camp in the lake breeze, lay down roots for our new lives, and procreate gently amongst ourselves. We would love the ensuing offspring created by our diverse ethnic offerings. Chicago is the most American of American cities" (5). Aside from the idealism at work in the group's imaginings of post-apocalyptic pastoral, their actions reveal that life at the Facility, or in any idyllic environment, will only be a recycling of pre-pandemic attitudes and behaviors. Manifest in the tyrannical group leader, Bob, the group represents the preservation of pre-pandemic traditions, not the promise of a new post-work revolutionary, as Shen Fever comes to represent an obliteration of "renewal and recovery possibilities" that "warns the collapse of inequitable social systems does not guarantee the death of associated ideas and norms" (Schaab 10, 11).

These "norms" are expressed through the group's post-apocalyptic form of hunter-gathering, which they call stalking. This mode of resource gathering, while draped in the survivalist rituals of self-reliance, is in essence a recreation of shopping. In brief, stalking involves the group sweeping suburban neighborhoods for provisions as they move toward Chicago. Attempting to guise the stalks as progressive acts of world building unlike the consumerism of the past, Bob classifies the stalks as "an aesthetic experience. . . . it isn't just looting. It is envisioning the future" (Ma, *Severance* 58). As such, the stalks involve procuring more than survival goods, the group accumulates the standard array of consumer goods: "A

library. DVD movies. Office supplies. Throw pillows. Tablecloths, on for every day, one for holidays. Ceramic planters. Soap dishes. Prescription drugs. Toys" (58). And like the office work that swallowed Candace's consciousness in the before times, the inventorying of these goods affords her a new method of zombifying herself: "I would get lost in the taking of inventory, with the categorizing and gathering, the packing of everything into space-efficient arrangements in the same boxes. . . . It was a trance. It was like burrowing underground, and the deeper I burrowed the warmer it became, and the more the nothing feeling subsumed me, snuffing out any worries and anxieties. It is the feeling I like best about working" (65). Exposing post-society living for just another cycle of work routines, *Severance* refuses to trust in the platitudes of return-to-nature narratives that suggest that the destruction or abandon of society would yield revolutionary alternatives.

By the novel's end, the Facility is revealed to be a shopping mall that Bob owns, and Candace is imprisoned by the group after they discover her pregnancy. Claiming to do so for her safety, the reality is that Bob fears losing Candace's unborn child, who he envisions as a divine blessing of humanity's continued existence. When Bob learns of Candace's pregnancy, he insists that "it means something. . . . I'm talking about divine selection" (31). However, this divinity brings with it a resurrection of the old ruthlessness that marked capitalism before and the infection now: Bob's interest in Candace's unborn baby evokes a corporate disregard for "individual life," dehumanizing Candace into an unfeeling producer under his employ (Atasoy and Horan 251). Thus, her imprisonment in the mall—she resides in a Sephora—mirrors her final days in NYC spent living in the Spectra office. The parallel between these two endpoints emphasizes the inescapability of these systems built to live on in the humans that they infect. Like the Shen Fever that inconspicuously enters its victims, the ethos of capitalism remains in

the social body, slowing infecting all exposed to it. Candace's only salvation is to flee on her own. After Bob becomes infected, Candace escapes the Facility and drives to Chicago.

In the final flight of the novel, Candace comes to an unexpected revelation concerning her pre-pandemic life. Driving down Milwaukee Avenue and recalling Jonathan's memories recounted to her from his time living in the city, Candace reflects on what it means to live in a city:

> To live in a city is to live the life that it was built for, to adapt to its schedule and rhythms, to move within the transit layout made for you during the morning and evening rush, winding through the crowds of fellow commuters. To live in a city is to consume its offerings. To eat at its restaurants. To drink at its bars. To shop at its stores. To pay its sales taxes. To give a dollar to its homeless.
>
> To live in a city is to take part in and to propagate its impossible systems. To wake up. To go to work in the morning. it is also to take pleasure in those systems because, otherwise, who could repeat the same routine, year in, year out? (290)

Considering all that has happened in the novel, it is fair to balk at Candace's resolution, to express confusion at what sounds like an acceptance of things as they are. However, there are hints to suggest that what Candace envisions is a world in which citizens are actively engaged in the living systems of their cities. Rather than shuffle through existence like a zombie, Candace's closing lines point toward a state of living that is vivacious and versatile, capable of both taking part in and propagating impossible systems. Her choice of *impossible* is perhaps the most suggestive part of her passage, as it evokes the imaginative potential of humans to perceive and construct things that are initially beyond comprehension. It is this, more than anything, that provides the optimism to keep Candace moving. Rather than settle upon a final destination,

Candace leaves the novel walking. In this act of perpetual motion, Ma calls to our attention the necessary truth of the post-work imaginary that Helen Hester and Nick Srnicek eloquently make: "A post-work society should not be mistaken for a utopian endpoint, then, but instead understood as part of an unending Promethean process of extending the realm of freedom. . . . Ultimately, what matters is not the endless reduction of necessary labour per se, but instead the liberation of time and the creation of institutions through which we might consciously and collectively guide the development of humanity. We need the freedom to determine the necessary" (187-88). These revelations happen on a continuous and evolving cycle; however, unlike the cycle of capitalist routine that dominates pre-pandemic life, these cycles are iterative, growing and maturing as they go.

Severance is a reminder that we still need to consider these late nineteenth and early twentieth century novels and what they have to say about our relationship to work, as the tension between work and self-actualization remains a relevant, if evolving, concern. While it may be fair to argue, for example, that the existential anxieties around automation depicted by the expressionists loses potency in the era of late capitalism, when these manufacturing jobs now represent a nostalgic time of American labor power, we must not forget that they have merely been transported to the Global South or ignore the fact that we have merely reproduced the tedium of factory labor in the doldrums of corporate paper pushing. Perhaps most important is the novel's insistence on optimism not as a narcotic but as a stimulant for change. For all the novel's depressive qualities, and like so many of the novels under discussion in this dissertation there are many, it returns at its end with a pitch for futurity that imagines human action, compassion, and growth as viable alternatives to the malaise of cynicism that supposes the rigidity of our social systems has locked us into an assured demise. More than before, with the

onslaught of anxiety-inducing issues to confront—including climate change, racial justice, wealth inequality, and political decay—it is easy to resign ourselves to defeat. However, it is important to recognize that change is not something that comes like a global pandemic, eradicating everything in its wake. Rather, as Saraf observes in Candace's observation on the returning vegetation in New York City, "rebel life springs forth" "through the cracks of imperial ruin" (22). This generative power is what I believe is so vital about the texts under consideration in this dissertation. They all provide a means of drawing forth rejuvenating new understandings of our literary past as a means of confronting and reimagining the present.

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Zahra, Tara. *Against The World: Anti-Globalism and Mass Politics Between the World Wars*. Norton, 2023.

Curriculum Vitae

Jesse Cook
JesseLCook88@gmail.com

Education

Ph.D. University of Nevada, Las Vegas, English Literature, expected Spring 2024
Dissertation: "Rewriting the American Work Narrative: Modernist Literature and the Paradox of Patriotic Labor" (Dr. Jessica Teague, Chair)

M.A. University of Nevada, Las Vegas, English Literature, 2016
Thesis: "'The Only Thing That Matters': A Critique of the Editorial Practices in *The Garden of Eden*" (UNLV Outstanding Thesis Award)

B.S. Utah Tech University, Literary Studies, 2013, *Cum Laude*

Publications

Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles

Hero to Zero: *The Adding Machine*, The Cowboy Mythos, and The Dystopian Future of "them damn figgers!" *The Space Between*. (Accepted).

Cook, Jesse. "'It Takes a Man to Work in Hell': *The Hairy Ape* and The Self-Destructive Paradox of White Working-Class Masculinity," *Modernism/modernity*. (forthcoming, January 2024)

Book Reviews

Cook, Jesse. Review of *African American Literature in Transition, 1930-1940*, edited by Eve Dunbar and Ayesha K. Hardison. *MELUS*. (48.1, Spring 2023).

Awards

Blake Emerging Scholarship, Hemingway Society, 2022.

Hinkle Travel Award, Hemingway Society, 2022.

Certificate of Special Congressional Recognition for participation as a program mentor for NSF and DOD STEM training during the UNITE: STEM/Big Data Camp, 2017.

UNLV Outstanding Thesis Award for "'The Only Thing That Matters:' A Critique of the Editorial Practices in *The Garden of Eden*," 2016.

The Brooks/Hudgins English Literary Essay Award for "A Necessary Ending: Wharton's Use of Conclusion in *The Custom of the Country* and *The House of Mirth,*" 2015.

Academic Positions

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Instructor, 2014 – Present

- ENG 451A: American Literature 1 [to the Civil War] (1 section, Spring 2021)
- ENG 232: World Literature 2 [18th century to the present] (1 section, Spring 2020)
- ENG 231: World Literature 1 [through the 17th century] (2 sections, Fall 2019 - Fall 2020)
- ENG 102: Composition 2 (4 sections, Fall 2015 - Spring 2019)
- ENG 101: Composition 1 (3 sections, Fall 2014 - Fall 2018)

Managing Editor, *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 2021 – Present

- Evaluate and process new submissions for review.
- Select referees to review submissions and assist with any issues they may have during the review process.
- Distribute editorial assignments to staff and ensure editorial work is completed on time.
- Work closely with the Editor-in-Chief and the journal's publisher to ensure production schedule stays on track.
- Organize and prepare supplemental journal materials (such as abstracts, bios, and images) for publication.

Assistant Editor, *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 2017 – 2021

Professional consultant, UNLV Writing Center, January – June 2018

- Produce writing modules and instructional videos for graduate-level nursing students.
- Represent the writing center in inter-departmental committees to expand student services.
- Manage graduate student workers.
- Oversee the online writing lab (OWL)

Lead consultant, UNLV Writing Center, 2014 – 2018

Conferences Presentations and Talks

Invited Talk: Guest Lecture on Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* for Eng. 467B/667B-1001, Modern American Drama: Theatre & Performance, 1920-Present, UNLV, 2023.

Seminar participant, *MSA* conference, Portland, OR, 2022.

"Performing Proust: Jake Barnes' Journey Through the Ideal, the Real, and the Remembered."
The Hemingway Society Annual Conference, Sheridan, WY, 2022.

"A Post-Colonial Praisesong: Subverting the Bildungsroman in *Praisesong for the Widow*."
MELUS Annual Conference, New Orleans, LA, 2022.

"History of the Mind: Constructing Identity by Constructing History in *100 Years of Solitude* and

Absalom, Absalom!" Faulkner and García Márquez Conference, Southeast Missouri State University, 2018.

Professional Services

Manuscript reviewer for *MELUS*: *Multiethnic Literature of the United States*.

Additional Experience

Archival research conducted at the John F. Kennedy Library for my master's thesis "'The Only Thing That Matters:' A Critique of the Editorial Practices in *The Garden of Eden*," 2015.