

**RAGGED FIGURES: THE LUMPENPROLETARIAT IN NELSON ALGREN  
AND RALPH ELLISON**

**by**

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*For graduate students on the left*

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## **Introduction**

### **Figuring (Out) the Lumpenproletariat**

#### **Paper Planes Straight From Hell**

Marxism has often struggled with the sociopolitical consequences of those who lack class identity, or social location of any kind, in capitalist society. The poor and the criminal, the desperate and the inventive who haunt the recesses of modern society have been epistemological and political challenges for Marxism and for anti-capitalist politics more expansively. In part, this is because Marx considered this group—which he named the lumpenproletariat, or “ragged proletariat”—irrelevant to the concerns of Marxism. But it’s also because the fluid, diverse composition of the lumpenproletariat (Marx introduced the term to describe nearly everyone without an identifiable class position or a role in reproducing the main social arrangements of capitalism) and its underworlds reminds us of the internal complexity of modern society and its processes, a complexity that often resists explication by pre-formulated theoretical paradigms. The lumpen remind us that theory—particularly of a revolutionary kind—must take that complexity as its starting point. Furthermore, proper Marxist thought proceeds from real conditions understood in their internally-dynamic fluidity and multivalent composition. Paradoxically then, one of the most marginal categories in Marx is in fact central to the development and continued effectiveness of the various, ever-urgent epistemological and political tasks that go by the name of Marxism.

Through an extended analysis of the lumpenproletariat in the mid-twentieth-century fiction of novelists Nelson Algren and Ralph Ellison, my dissertation introduces this concept of the lumpenproletariat to American literary studies. Reading for the social and conceptual places of the lumpenproletariat is my strategy for redefining the practice of Marxist writing, reevaluating the theoretical and formal experiments of the American literary left in the 1930s-1950s period, opening up new approaches to Algren and

Ellison's lives and work, and demonstrating the remarkable epistemological and political work of which literary form is capable.

Before proceeding to a full exposition of this project in the introduction proper, however, I offer a tactile demonstration of the aesthetic, political, and theoretical energies of the lumpenproletariat as mobilized in a work of contemporary popular culture: the 2007 song "Paper Planes," by Sri Lankan-descended British hip-hop artist M.I.A. The song's portrait of social outsiders, and the theoretical project to which it subjects that portrait, demonstrate the specific stakes of Marx's concept. "Paper Planes" foreshadows my dissertation's treatment of the more extensive literary implementations of the lumpen in Algren and Ellison's fiction, and it indicates why I insist on preserving Marx's term (in all its Germanic clunkiness) as the object of my study, rather than supplanting it with empirical descriptors like "homeless" or "outcasts." M.I.A.'s acclaimed song vividly demonstrates some of the theoretical intricacies of the lumpenproletariat. Its clever lyricism and self-conscious attempt to "do theory" in a cultural text lead us straight to my dissertation's correlation of the formal and theoretical work performed by and through the "ragged figures" of the lumpenproletariat.

"Paper Planes" describes, in rather romantic terms, the life of those who struggle to get by on the legal and material margins of globalized capitalist society: people denied full subjectivity and recognized citizenship in a post-national economy, the refugees from the third world struggling on the margins of the first world. While capitalist processes of dislocation and compelled migration necessitate the criminal acts of the song's figures, those oppressive structural determinations are de-emphasized in the lyrics. Instead, M.I.A. affirms the criminal means (violence, robbery, black market transactions) to which these figures resort as alternative routes to material subsistence, even affluence. She appears to cast the lives of global capitalism's non-subjects as anything but deprived. In fact, those marginal lives no longer even seem marginal: these figures may be excluded from the legitimate global market of capitalism, but they engage in processes of commodity exchange on a global black market. M.I.A. rewrites their marginality as an empowering temporal distinction. In an age of faceless transnational capitalism, her hustlers resemble an earlier model of the capitalist as crafty entrepreneur. She invokes

and appropriates the aura of a previous stage of capitalism whose practices purportedly sustain and encourage, rather than efface, individual subjectivity.

Is the song then a weird production of capitalist nostalgia, a nostalgia which masks economic deprivation and social marginality by transposing both into heroic registers? Is M.I.A. telling us it's an opportunity—that it's even cool—to be poor and placeless? Even if we see the song's brazen, violent rhetoric as a political attempt to claim and inhabit a devalued identity, her claiming of that identity would seem to rely on a sort of ghetto exoticism, glamorizing the very forces which devalue that identity in the first place. But M.I.A. is actually doing something more intricate. "I fly like paper get high like planes," she tells us at the outset, and goes on to describe her skill for forging immigration visas. M.I.A. gives us a persona who literally *rewrites* marginality as a mobile subjectivity. *Because* she has no place as a national citizen, she is potentially a citizen of any and all nations because she must forge her own visas. She appropriates her exclusion in order to *produce* her own freedom, flying "like paper" quite simply because she makes (a certain form) of paper. Citizenship, the mode of social inclusion examined here, is always tied to authorized written papers. Non-citizens are routinely deprived of access to the means of survival by not having their papers in order. In the reality of global migration, "papers" are a loaded signifier. But precisely because national inclusion and exclusion are processes of writing and documentation, they are vulnerable, at their very center, to rewriting and forgery. In an era in which capital itself crosses borders and negates national distinction, paper figures the permeability and fragility of the border between inclusion and exclusion, center and margin, legitimacy and illegitimacy. Those borders still matter, of course (literally: they have material consequences), but "Paper Planes" suggests that the parodic resemblances between the structural agents of transnational capitalism, and those marginalized subjects hustling on a transnational black market, make marginality a condition of potential. Here is the song's central dialectic: there really are people who must fend for themselves because of the structural exclusions of capitalism, yet those same people are potentially and frequently enabled by the very ontology of global capital. They are both marginal and not marginal, the border between the two states being as real but also as slight and as revisable as a blank sheet of paper.

We can theoretically situate M.I.A.'s project by reference to the figurative extensions of the "raggedness" of Marx's "ragged proletariat." For if the lumpenproletarian types of "Paper Planes" are economically and discursively "ragged"—materially deprived, and unrecognized as subjects—they recuperate that raggedness as generative mobility, an open-ended rather than hemmed in condition, a state of exclusion that is not absolute but frayed around the edges and open to its own possibilities. The material history of paper production from rags gives us a handy historical figure for conceptualizing this passage from deprivation to subsistence and the processes by which those Marx called the "refuse of all classes" recycle their condition as one of productivity (*Eighteenth Brumaire* 65). When read symptomatically, Marx's lumpenproletariat encompasses these two poles of marginality in an ongoing process of negotiation. It conceptualizes the relation, in various concrete historical forms, between material and discursive exteriority and the possibility that such exteriority could lead to new sociopolitical options and theoretical directions. "Paper Planes" gives us an aesthetic representation *not* of an empirical social category, *but of the form that this conceptual relation takes* in twenty-first century global capitalism. To fault M.I.A. for glamorizing illegality and thereby providing an alibi for the iniquities of capital is to miss this point, to read the song only as an empirical portrait. The political shrewdness of the song can only be grasped when it's approached as a song about the lumpenproletariat as a concept, and not just third-world immigrants and hustlers.

But for all her bravado, M.I.A. doesn't lose site of the material hardships of the global migrant. The song's lyrics are built upon a musical sample of the opening of The Clash's 1982 punk anthem "Straight to Hell." "Straight to Hell" also describes the experiences of marginalized groups, but in what could be called a strictly materialist manner. The song references multiple forms of the oppressions and destitutions wrought by late capitalism: immigrants from the third world facing racism and material exclusion in the first, American imperialism in Vietnam, and the economic disenfranchisement of workers in a post-industrial economy. The song's lyrical distinction derives from the way it interweaves these conditions from a perspective that refuses to get sentimental about them, but at the same time refuses to modulate its outrage over them. The song is a powerful protest text, drawing effectively on a punk sensibility of anger and bitter

sarcasm to articulate an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist perspective. Clash singer Joe Strummer's ironic advice for the victims of these global capitalist iniquities is to go straight to hell, words that indicate the material conditions of those victims as well as their irrelevance, their utter lack of any significance, to the agents of their oppression. The song protests these injustices, and diagnoses their social and economic causation, but portrays marginality in all forms as an unbearable and absolute hell. The song's dislocated persons inhabit a "no man's land," but this excluded place is no productive, sustaining underworld: "there ain't no asylum here."

By citing the Clash's portrait, M.I.A. intends to build on it, to supplement the position of the politically well-intentioned yet socially and culturally-privileged British punk rocker with the perspective of the third-world immigrant. We're "already going to hell, just pumping that gas," M.I.A. insists: life goes on in hell, which actually offers its own conditions for sustainability, *even* material success. To see the globally displaced as socially dead is to unintentionally mirror the vision of hegemonic ideologies, which think that those who don't matter for capitalism, or don't matter for the nation, can't matter at all. The Clash echo (although with considerably more sympathy) Marx's conscious understanding of the lumpenproletariat. For the thinker invested in how capitalism "produces . . . its own grave-diggers," those who have no functional role within capitalism are irrelevant (*Communist Manifesto* 16). The proletariat's inevitable revolutionary capacity ultimately derives in Marx *not* from absolute oppression, but from their structural place at the center of capitalist production. So between the sampling of "Straight to Hell" and her own lyrics, M.I.A. limns the terms of a very old debate on the left about the political effectiveness and the creative capacities of the oppressed. Her lyrics explore the possibility that a specific, post-national form of global capital might actually now enable creativity, vibrancy, and resistance not among those integral to its economic processes, but among those it marginalizes. This political vision should be familiar to us, due especially to Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's endeavors to locate revolutionary alternatives in the sociocultural productions of a mobile, global poor.

But "Paper Planes" stops short of ontologizing this vision, of stating with absolute certainty that this is now how capitalism and resistance work. After all, the instantly-recognizable opening of "Straight to Hell" remains: "Paper Planes" signifies upon, but

does not utterly reject or efface, the political ethos of The Clash's song. In this way, the concrete destitution of social marginality is preserved in "Paper Planes," which refuses to synthesize the lumpenproletarian dialectic of lack and productivity, marginality and mobility, irrelevance and freedom. Understanding the historically-contingent, internally-complex relation between the terms of this dialectic, *without* losing sight of one in an enthusiastic embrace of the other, enables investigation into a perpetual problem faced by Marxism: the problem of the relation between the workings of capitalism and the chances for political resistance, whether those chances are economic, social, or cultural in nature. What Marx's writings, "Straight to Hell," and "Paper Planes" have in common is that they are various attempts to tackle this problem. The answers of each are only provisional—they are temporary positions in the ongoing struggle to figure out and negate capitalism's ever-protean forms of oppression.

Similarly, the literary projects of Nelson Algren and Ralph Ellison employ the concept of the lumpenproletariat to address this problem across three decades of American history, in relation to the differential epistemological and political challenges offered by the Great Depression, World War II, and the onset of the Cold War. For Marxism, the lumpenproletariat directs us to the margins of capitalist socioeconomic structures and normative ideological discourses, but also to the limits of Marxist theory itself. This work of getting outside in order to challenge what's inside is fundamental to politically-engaged theory and literature. Marx certainly wasn't conscious of the fact that he was conceptualizing that movement of engaged critique when he introduced the lumpenproletariat. Yet his attitude toward this category indicates that he sensed the theoretical challenge it embodied. Quite simply, the diverse heterogeneity and complexity of the social realms beyond capital's primary economic relationships suggested that historical and social processes were less tidy than Marx anticipated. Marx refused to engage with this challenge the lumpenproletariat posed to the coherence of his theory, but later theorists have symptomatically extracted it from his attempts to bury it under a mountain of rhetorical disdain. The goal of my dissertation is to explore how two American writers took up the challenge that Marx refused. In diverse ways, Algren and Ellison used the figure of the lumpenproletariat to fashion a historically-contingent practice of literary Marxism that often dissented from the official positions of the

Communist movement as it theorized American society and culture *both* from Marxist perspectives and from within the practical terms of fiction writing. As a result, their fiction not only rivals the sophistication of Western Marxist critical theory but also undertakes bold experiments in literary form.

### **The Theoretical Life of Revolutionary Literature: Figures and Figuring, Rags and Paper**

Marx had nothing but scorn for the nineteenth-century equivalents of the people of “Paper Planes” and “Straight to Hell.” In some of his more memorable formulations, Marx dismisses them as “that passively rotting mass” (*Communist Manifesto* 14) or the “scum, offal, refuse of all classes” (*Eighteenth Brumaire* 65). Lacking political consciousness or class identity, they were too easily co-opted by the forces of repression (which is the problem of the 1848-1851 class struggle in France, which Marx documents in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*). Furthermore, their need to survive on the margins made them necessarily self-interested and self-invested, whether out of criminal or purely economic reasons. In any case, Marx saw this self-interest as conducive only to ruling-class bribery, and not to progressive struggle. The lumpen have no place in a theory of the revolutionary (and morally virtuous) proletariat emerging from *within* the economic and social relations of capital, and they are more than likely going to be on the other side of the barricades anyway. For capitalism and for Marxism, the lumpenproletariat is materially and discursively without place—quite completely homeless.

Yet by looking at “Paper Planes,” I’ve tried to indicate the value of Marx’s concept of the lumpenproletariat, both for Marxist theory and for literary studies. Recognizing in Marx’s work the disruptive roles played by the recesses of modern society points the way to a more adequate, concrete understanding of the excluded and the irrelevant. Here I refer not only to excluded peoples and social environments, but neglected, dismissed, or overlooked conceptual needs and directions. The lumpenproletariat, as the exterior of both orthodox Marxist theory and material capitalist processes, enables critical examinations, revisions, and deconstructions of both. These are the ultimate stakes of Marx’s account of the lumpenproletariat, for even though these people may be irrelevant and objectionable to him,

he cannot conjure them out of existence. For one thing, they can block the supposedly necessary ascendancy of the revolutionary proletariat by providing foot soldiers for the ruling class, thus scrambling the prescribed teleological outcomes of class struggle. Furthermore, their very heterogeneous composition (a lot of different social types don't fall into any of the main economic classes) compels us to see the social topography of modern society as more than a simple reflection of economic relations. The lumpenproletariat was the name Marx gave to the problem, the new piece of information, or the exception that troubles the rule and prompts theoretical revision and recalculation. Theory cannot rest on its laurels and declare itself complete. Historical developments, the relative indeterminacy of lived social processes, the shifting forms of capitalism, and the complications of culture all require Marxism to engage in critical examination and revision of its own precepts if it is to be adequate to its political objectives.

Algren and Ellison's work frequently focuses on lumpenproletarian characters, but does so in order to take up that theoretical labor of revision and innovation. As politically-committed fiction, their work does not merely document oppression, celebrate the identities of marginalized groups, or denounce injustice; rather, it *thinks*: it practices its own mode of Marxist thought and anti-capitalist critique through literary form. From the 1930s to the 1950s, Algren and Ellison grasped that the social visibility of lumpen figures called not merely for their compassionate representation, but for a rethinking of Marxism, American identity, and political strategy in light of the limitations and possibilities embodied by those figures. To do so, both writers developed their own craft-based protocols of literary practice, engaging in considerable experimentation to harness the capacities of literary form for radical sociopolitical analysis across three tumultuous decades. This project is practically put to work in texts such as Algren's *Somebody in Boots* (1935) and *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1949), and Ellison's *Slick* (an unfinished late 1930s novel) and *Invisible Man* (1952).

To demonstrate Algren and Ellison's literary mode of engaged theory, I draw on critical theory, especially the insights and interventions of Louis Althusser. Althusser's work is crucial for measuring the theoretical weight of Algren and Ellison's fiction. Althusser's concepts of social structure, formation, and processes help us glimpse the Marxist sophistication of their fiction, which has hardly ever been seen as theoretically sophisticated (in Algren's case) or as Marxist (in Ellison's case). What Althusser more

than any other Western Marxist theorist makes clear is that Marxism is defined by its *form* of theoretical practice, and *not* by a determinative content. Marxism is a certain way of doing theory and politics, not a definitive theoretical or political content (say, historical determination or working-class advocacy, respectively). Althusser's writings from the various periods of his career situate Marxism in terms of theoretical contingency, internal fluidity, and conceptual dynamism. Marxism proper, Althusser teaches us, is the *other* of orthodoxy, a name for the rich, politically resourceful, and always surprising process of intellectual production itself. Encountering the limitations of official Communist policy, yet sensing the need to develop a Marxist approach to the sociopolitical climates of modern America, Ellison and Algren used their fiction to produce new knowledge, not to reflect left-wing orthodoxy. The problems, challenges, and opportunities they encountered in this process were similar to ones Althusser and other Marxists encountered in other times and in other places. Like Althusser or Antonio Gramsci, Algren and Ellison implicitly recognized that contingent national and historical circumstances—circumstances often embodied by lumpen characters and types—complicated or discredited normative Marxist concepts, and they proceeded accordingly. Reading their work alongside Althusser allows us to see Algren and Ellison as interlocutors in the major theoretical conversations of Western Marxism, a tradition from which Americans and literary writers have largely been absent. Hence, my dissertation re-examines and, in some cases, revises some central Althusserian propositions—the relation of science and ideology; the problematic; the form of the social as a structure in dominance; the institutional construction of subjectivity; and the paradoxically non-empirical nature of socially-adequate, politically-relevant knowledge—in the process of reading for them in American literature. In what constitutes my dissertation's most significant expansion of Althusserian thought, I rely on Althusser's conceptualization of Marxist theoretical practice—what he also termed, on occasion, “science”—to define and analyze the combined theoretical and literary practice—the shifting yet interrelated intellectual, political, aesthetic, and formal protocols—informing Algren and Ellison's work. Marxism still has much to offer toward enriching our understanding of the myriad conditions under which literature is produced, and Althusserian Marxism in particular, I argue, offers valuable tools and guiding assumptions for literary study.

The literary and theoretical dimensions of politically-committed literary practice, in Algren and Ellison's case, come together around three main connotations of figures and figuring. The multifold connotative energies of the "ragged *figures*" of the lumpenproletariat link the specific craft-based and formal properties of literary production to the epistemological stakes of theory: literature both figures (in the literary-rhetorical sense) and figures (in the cognitive sense). First, because lumpenproletarian types dwell outside the purview of orthodox Marxism and capitalist ideology, they are visible only in *liminal* form as hazy *figures* rather than full subjects or coherent objects of knowledge. As such, they suggest the blindnesses of orthodox Marxism and the limits of bourgeois ideology—they occupy the margins of what these bodies of thought are able to adequately know, their ragged and frayed end-points. They introduce an outside that is the precondition of further theoretical expansion and exploration. Thus, they are material for the literary work of *figuration*, the formal and poetic practice of crafting a literary text. That figuration, in Algren and Ellison's work, is finally the epistemological task of *figuring (out)* the chances for politics in a given situation. The "ragged figure" of the lumpenproletariat, in my dissertation, ultimately references *the theoretical life of revolutionary literature*: the practical processes by which texts and writers produce knowledge about the world and strategies for changing it. Examining how texts think, in other words, is inseparable from close attention to their formal and metaphorical dynamics, their specifically literary properties and agendas. The relation of the (literary) figure to (political) knowledge is the general question underwriting my specific readings of texts and authors in this dissertation.

Before proceeding further, let's flesh out the theoretical purchase of the lumpenproletariat by turning to an atypical mention of the lumpenproletariat in Marx. In *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx ascribes a theoretically-generative role to the social types he would later disparage as the lumpenproletariat. Marx critiques bourgeois political economy for taking no notice of full human subjects: it can only encompass within its precepts the employed worker as an instrument of production. It thus replicates the perspective of the capitalist, reducing the worker to nothing more than his instrumental capacity:

Political economy therefore does not recognize the unoccupied worker, the working man in so far as he is outside this work relationship. The swindler, the cheat, the beggar, the unemployed, the starving, the destitute and the criminal working man are *figures* which exist not *for it*, but only for other eyes—for the eyes of doctors, judges, grave-diggers, beadles, etc. Nebulous figures which do not belong within the province of political economy (335, emphasis original).

In the original German, the term Marx uses that is here translated as “figures” is *Gestalten* (shapes, outlines), and the term translated here as “nebulous figures” is *Gesperster* (ghosts, specters, shades). Both describe the first sense of *figure* as I articulate it above: unformed, imprecise objects that appear just beyond the bounds of the known (*Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte* 248). Figures on the margins of political economy, Marx argues, signal the *limits* of that body of knowledge, and point the way to a superior theorizing practice that can begin to recognize capitalist labor as a dehumanizing, reductive process. Thus, these lumpen types, available to the “sight” of existing knowledge only as liminal shapes, spur the production of *new* knowledge. In the fiction of Algren and Ellison, the glimpse of the figure of the lumpenproletariat on the margins of Marxist theory does not negate the theoretical purchase of Marxism altogether. But by allowing the Marxist thinker and writer to get outside of Marxism, to see Marxism from a fresh perspective, the lumpen figure enables the ongoing constitution and reinvention of Marxist theoretical practice. Furthermore, in an American society that stigmatizes the poor, desperate, and criminal, the lumpenproletariat energizes analysis from beyond the bounds of discursive and material structures, revitalizing anti-capitalist critique. The lumpenproletariat negates theoretical closure, keeping the production of knowledge alive, relevant, and dynamic.

While we haven’t properly credited Marx with pioneering this theoretical implication of socially-dislocated and transient types, it has been implemented before in literary studies. For instance, in the conclusion to his seminal *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, Houston Baker introduces to African-American studies the model of the “scholar as hobo, as a liminal trickster always on the move” (200). This transient is Baker’s figure for the liberatory political work of literary studies, which deconstructs received truths in order to reconstruct repressed and silenced ones. Just as the hobo moves about the country, rejecting organization and location in favor of continual dynamism and reinvention, the scholar as hobo perpetually deconstructs bodies of

knowledge in order to recover what that knowledge has foreclosed upon. Baker's hobo negates epistemological closure while generating new theoretical directions.

Louis Althusser shows us how the lumpenproletariat is Marxism's own mechanism of (re)generative deconstruction. In his autobiography, he offers a memorable account of the difference between idealism and materialism. The idealist thinker—whether the orthodox Marxist or bourgeois ideologue—is someone who rides trains with a ticket and a timetable. He “knows which station the train leaves from and also its destination. He knows it in advance and when he gets on a train, he knows where he is going because the train is taking him there.” For these thinkers, trips of thought always go where they're supposed to go—nothing new happens as a result. By contrast, the properly materialist Marxist *hops* the train “without knowing where it is coming from or where it is going” (*Future* 217). The real Marxist never knows what to expect from the accidents of social form and process but tries to figure out how revolutionary politics should proceed from and within them. Like Baker, Althusser connects the disruptive transience of the hobo with the proper practice of Marxist theory. If we grasp how this figurative connection between the hobo and theory operates, we can grasp how literary texts concerned with lumpenproletarian experience are not merely muckraking portraits, but sites for the production of theory.

Of course, both of these examples, in making figurative use of the hobo's mobility, neglect the actual, material condition of that mobility, which is never *actually* as heroic as Baker and Althusser's figures suggest. Algren and Ellison's work, however, dialogues with *both* the figurative potential *as well as* the material delimitation of the lumpen. Their texts situate themselves at different points between these two states of the lumpenproletariat—between the lumpen as delimited and non-productive (Marx, the Clash) and the lumpen as productive, mobile outsiders (M.I.A., Baker, Althusser). These states are always in contradiction, and that unresolved contradiction is definitive of the lumpenproletariat as I use the term in this dissertation. M.I.A., we recall, rendered that contradiction by sampling “Straight to Hell” and using its political position to complement and complicate her own. The coexistence of real deprivation and figurative possibility in the lumpenproletariat reminds us of the real-world stakes of any figurative or conceptual appropriation of lumpen life. Such appropriation's ultimate end is to figure

out the chances of sociopolitical change. The political goal of lumpenproletarian figuration is the eradication of social marginality and destitution—or to put it in more utopian terms, the creation of a social form in which the distance between the two states of the lumpenproletariat will be closed, in which the figurative creative power of capitalism’s lumpenproletariat will be the real material conditions of all social life itself.

Marx’s concept thus sutures two longstanding traditions of understanding the absolutely oppressed and outcast. In the dissertation, I describe approaches that emphasize one of these two states of the lumpenproletariat (possibility or delimitation) as *romantic* and *suspicious* understandings, respectively, of the lumpenproletariat. I figure each approach in terms of *paper* and *rags*, a symbolic economy which correlates the possibilities of a blank sheet of paper and the utter and final destitution suggested by the rag. The “raggedness” of the lumpenproletariat references *both* paper and rags, two objects whose history of production allows us to see them as at once fundamentally contiguous and yet very different in connotation. As a result, both suspicious parsings of the lumpenproletariat as utterly materially delimited, and romantic parsings of the lumpenproletariat as bearers of possibility, are, at various times and for various strategies, appropriate and instrumental. I admit some figurative license in advancing this rags/paper hermeneutic, which I intend not as a historicist claim about the relationship of the lumpen, rags, and paper production, but only as a clarifying tool, a shorthand vocabulary for the matrix of limitation and possibility definitive of the lumpenproletariat. Paper, of course, is no longer made from rags in the twentieth century, but the intuitive sense of the rags/paper trope works nicely as the figure for the lumpenproletariat’s conceptual specificity.

Because of the influence on both writers of Marxism and American cultural ideology, Algren and Ellison’s fiction makes use of both approaches to the lumpenproletariat at various points in their careers. The romantic notion of the social outsider embodying possibilities beyond the established and the normative is a distinctly American idea, one which derives from some of America’s most ideological narratives of itself and of American subjectivity. Algren and Ellison situate this romantic discourse alongside orthodox Marxism’s suspicion of the materially marginal. As we see in the third section of this Introduction, the romantic possibility of the lumpenproletariat can be

found throughout canonical U.S. literature, in texts accorded privileged status as defining the literary implementation of American distinctiveness. It even inflects the presence of Americanism and the idea of America in Marxism and other radical traditions. Algren and Ellison's practice derives from this romantic tradition, but the suspicions of Marxism serve to orient the figurative appropriation of lumpenproletarian lack, destitution, and desperation in a materialist, politically-committed direction. When a writer can see the lumpen figure as someone like Huckleberry Finn, the conscientious outsider who escapes attempts to "sivilize" him (Twain 296), but *also* as one of Marx's outcasts whose deprived conditions make them "bribed tool[s] of reactionary intrigue" (*Communist Manifesto* 14), that writer is equipped with a politically-purposive, epistemologically and figuratively mobile framework for thinking and writing.

In philosophical terms, my dissertation has two guiding themes. In my reconstruction of Algren and Ellison's careers, in my manner of joining Althusserianism with literary history and analysis, and in my consideration of the place of the radical writer in America, I privilege singularity over the general and the capacities of writing to produce the new—in the forms of knowledge, insight, or possibility—rather than to reflect an existing reality. I make claims about all of these subjects by focusing on the singularities of two writers, by attending to what differentiates them from the various general—and often reductive—authorial identities in which they've been previously located (proletarian writer, African-American writer, Chicago realist, modernist, etc). This approach reveals the complexity and sociohistorical contingency of the politically committed writer and text. Althusser is crucial to this project because he positions the specific, the anti-abstract, and the complex in its actual, concrete form as the site and precondition of theory. My attention to the metaphoric work of Algren and Ellison's "ragged figures" is a literary-critical implementation of this Althusserian gesture: by expanding the literal significance of a concrete vehicle, metaphor can be thought of as a literary mode of thinking (from) the singular.

Why this differential analysis necessitates a biographical, historical approach to literary writers and texts is suggested by Jean-Paul Sartre, who in his *Search for a Method* (1960) essentially challenges Marxism with the following reminder: Flaubert may have been bourgeois, but not all members of the bourgeoisie were Flaubert.

Likewise, *Madame Bovary* may be a bourgeois French novel, but not all bourgeois French novels are *Madame Bovary* (57-65). One must then analyze the singular, *actual* “class content” of Flaubert or *Madame Bovary*: how does Flaubert emerge from and engage with the specific bourgeois class of his time and place? How does *Madame Bovary* specifically thematize or disrupt a recognizably bourgeois worldview? Sartre calls for a historicizing and biographical method that restores the complexity of the relation between author/text and historical/material context. This necessitates foregoing recourse to idealist, abstract categories of class and authorial identity. Clearly, not all bourgeois writers are the same; neither, I add, are all anti-capitalist writers. Sartre’s reminder thus informs my approach to such questions as the figurative role played by the lumpenproletariat in any given text; the state of a writer’s relation to the Communist Party in a given moment; and the relation of a given text to the diachronic arc not only of a writer’s literary career, but of a writer’s extra-literary experiences and commitments.

Secondly, I insist throughout on the productive, rather than reflective, function of literature and theory. I resist various models of literary studies that treat texts as historical documents or cultural effects, as second-order reflections of something else. Rather than representations or distortions of sociohistorical referents, or textual symptoms of discursive and ideological constellations, I approach texts as sites of practice, as material results of attempts by historically-located writers to *figure something out*. Writing offers its own distinct opportunities for knowledge. Revolutionary fiction in the United States, at its most interesting and relevant, is devoted to this epistemological labor, rather than to just consciousness-raising (persuading or proselytizing) or minority representation (the project of getting classed, raced, or gendered others “into” the literary canon). Again, I here take my cue from Althusser, who sought to redefine the scientificity of Marxist theory not in terms of how accurately its theses reflected empirical reality, but in terms of how free it was from ideological assumptions, from the apparent immutability of reality, and thus how capable it was of producing *new* knowledge. Althusser linked this theoretical inventiveness to the practical inventiveness of revolutionary politics: Marxist theory and Marxist politics come together in a shared ambition to produce the new and the unanticipated. My dissertation thus always returns to the singular and the productive,

two conceptual orders of analysis that offer literary studies its richest understandings of texts, writers, history, and theory.

The remainder of this introduction details and substantiates the theoretical and literary-historical dimensions of my dissertation. In the first section below, I describe the troubled status of the lumpenproletariat within Marxism, delineate the ways Marx understood this concept, and explore the insights offered by the small yet potent set of readings of the lumpenproletariat in Marx's work. Then, I turn to the place of the lumpenproletariat in American cultural discourse and mainstream literary history, establishing the influence on Algren and Ellison of a distinctly American, romantic understanding of the socially-marginal individual. In the next section, I turn briefly to Althusserianism and my study's general contributions to Marxist literary theory. Althusser helps us theorize the practical dimensions, and epistemological and political potential, of revolutionary writing. In the last section, I outline the general ways in which my extended focus on Algren and Ellison dialogues with scholarship on the American literary left, proletarian literature, and Communist-associated writing in the United States in general.

### **Lumpen/Proletariat: Marxism and Orthodox "Marxism," or, Why Marx Hated the Lumpen but Marxism Needs Them**

Marx and Engels seem to have coined the term lumpenproletariat, but they never introduce it as a new concept. Rather, their usage of it indicates that they expected their reader to, in Robert Bussard's words, "understand its connotations" (677; Draper 2285-6n1). As we'll see, the word itself is open to etymological and interpretational ambiguity, turning upon the complex connotations of proletariat and the *lumpen* prefix. Furthermore, as we've seen, the empirical phenomenon referenced is an untidy, even contradictory assemblage of social types. On almost all levels of significance, then, the lumpenproletariat is an unstable category. Marx's famous "definition" of the mid-nineteenth-century Parisian lumpenproletariat, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, is notable for how little definitional work it actually accomplishes:

Alongside decayed *roués* with doubtful means of subsistence and of doubtful origin, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jail-birds, escaped galley-slaves,

swindlers, mountebanks, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaux*, brothel-keepers, porters, *literati*, organ-grinders, rag-pickers, knife-grinders, tinkers, beggars, in short the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass thrown hither and thither, which the French term *la Bohème*. (65)

The lumpen are nearly *everyone* not stably situated in a productive economic class.

Marx's reliance on the rhetorical "in short" indicates his inability to map this category precisely. The most adequate empirical definition of the lumpenproletariat that can be deduced from Marx's usage is offered by Hal Draper. In Draper's words, the term "is the catch-all for those who fall out, or drop out, of the existing social structure so that they are no longer functionally an integral part of society. To survive at all, in the interstices of the same society, they must adopt a parasitic mode of existence. The tendency toward illegality simply arises from the scarcity of other choices." Because their marginal modes of social subsistence make them necessarily self-interested, when it comes to historical class struggle, they would be susceptible to reactionary co-option (Draper 2309). Based on his observations of the role of the Paris lumpen in the 1848-1851 class struggle in France, Marx generally saw the lumpen as a political enemy. In describing the 1848 conflict, Marx distinguished the "working and thinking proletarians" from their enemies, the "hired and armed" lumpenproletariat (qtd. in Hayes 447). Here, he offers a distilled account of his objection to the lumpen: exterior to labor and production, they are as a result cognitively delimited, unable to accurately "see" the direction history was taking through class struggle, and unable to locate their own objective interests with the proletariat in that struggle. To quote Peter Hayes: "Working and thinking, a place in the relations of production and the class consciousness it engenders, encapsulated the distinction between proletariat and lumpenproletariat" (447).

Accordingly, Marx is filled with contempt for the lumpen, an emotional response that tends to muddy the definition of the term even further. Peter Hayes finds that Marx, in his writing, complicated things by distinguishing between "material and mental attributes of the lumpenproletariat." Some social elements are materially excluded, but some figures from all social classes also *refuse* a proper place in production, pursuing their own interests by theft or unscrupulousness, imitating the immoral behavior of the lumpen. Being lumpen could mean, for Marx, structurally impoverished, behaviorally criminal, or both. For example, Marx referred to the French financial class as "the *rebirth*

*of the lumpenproletariat on the heights of bourgeois society.*” Because they made money not from owning the means of production, like proper capitalists, but by gambling on already-accumulated capital, they retained the mental and moral vestiges of the material lumpen (Hayes 446, 449).

The murkiness of Marx’s material/mental distinction as compellingly articulated by Hayes indicates that it is unclear whether Marx understands the impoverishments and actions of the lumpen to be produced by capitalism, or whether he, like his Victorian contemporaries, attributes their material degradation to innate moral and psychological shortcomings. Hal Draper accordingly argues that “ragged proletariat” is in fact a not wholly accurate English-language construal of the term, since the English sense of “raggedness” generally connotes only poverty: “It is regularly assumed that the prefix is *Lumpen* = rag, tatter,” he notes. “Yet the background points rather to the related word *Lump* (pl. *Lumpen*, *Lumpe*) = knave, ragamuffin.” For Draper, it is criminality, not poverty, that forms “the crux” of Marx’s use of the term (2285-6n1). Robert Bussard writes that, while the German term *Lump* originally referred to a person clothed in rags, “by the nineteenth century the emphasis was not on the poverty of the *Lump*, but rather on his knavery” (679). Gertrude Himmelfarb notes that while the German edition of *The Communist Manifesto* used the term lumpenproletariat, the first English edition translated it as “the mob,” and Engels’s own supervised 1888 English edition translated it as “dangerous classes” (387), evacuating from it any strong suggestion of impoverishment or structural victimization. In *Capital*, Marx distinguishes “vagabonds, criminals, prostitutes, in short the actual lumpenproletariat” from the three other groups in the “lowest sediment of the relative surplus population,” or those who have been disenfranchised by capitalism: paupers out of work, orphans and poor children, and “the demoralized, the ragged, and those unable to work” (797). Here, the lumpen are not the helpless victims of capitalism, but those who willingly opt out of production to pursue illicit lifestyles. This definition, however, involves a less than lucid distinction between the (bad) “ragged proletariat” and (good) “ragged unable to work.” In the original German, Marx uses *Lumpenproletariat* for the former and *Verlumpfte* (ragged) for the latter (*Das Kapital* 518-9). The line between structurally-determined poverty and willful

criminality is thus thin in Marx, but the latter assumption usually wins out, both for Marx and for Communist invocations of the lumpenproletariat since Marx.

So why does European philosophy's greatest opponent of capitalist injustice adopt such a normative, dismissive view of those most disenfranchised by capitalism? Marx's suspicion of and hostility to the lumpen must ultimately be understood as symptoms of the term's conceptual challenge to his theory. Gertrude Himmelfarb explains that the concept of the lumpen occasions scorn from Marx precisely because it encompasses social and economic outsiders, those who play no role in history according to the general dictates of historical materialism. For Himmelfarb, Marxism itself necessitates Marx's consignment of the lumpen to excessive theoretical irrelevance on three counts: their marginal social existence makes them an unthinkable entity in a highly-organized socialist society; in their black market operations, they cling to capitalist practices; and finally, since they explicitly reject labor, they would be placeless in a socialist society dependent on the organization of labor and high productivity (Himmelfarb 391-92).

We might also see the conceptual scandal of the lumpen for Marx in the term itself. As the "ragged proletariat," the term describes a relationship of undefined negativity with respect to the proletariat. The lumpen are the proletariat but not; they are the proletariat in rags, a difference as unformed, unclear, and "ragged" as the definition of the lumpenproletariat itself. We might read the lumpenproletariat as encompassing the conceptual and historical beyond of the proletariat: everything that exceeds, is irreducible to, and troubles the validity of Marx's central concept. The lumpen threat to the proletariat occurs both in theory and on the barricades, because Marx's proletariat is fundamental to the epistemological authority of what I'll call orthodox or normative Marxism. According to *The Communist Manifesto*, the proletariat emerges by necessity from capitalist structures of labor. Capitalist production breaks down individual, cultural, and national differences among workers, producing a new class, the proletariat, that no longer has anything to lose but its chains and therefore acts collectively in its *class* interest: the negation of class society. The revolution of the proletariat is thus the necessary outcome of capitalism, and a classless society (a communist mode of production) is the necessary endpoint of history.

This theory of production, society, and historical movement frequently has orthodox status in twentieth-century Marxism, and in the claims and positions of Communist institutions. As a theory of sociohistorical necessity that, in terms of producing knowledge, privileges the abstract law over the concrete instance, it claims to identify the non-apparent, essential nature of phenomena, the “secret” structure and justification of social and historical events. It reduces the apparent unpredictability of social and political events to fundamental economic and historical laws. To one who has mastered its conceptual apparatus, orthodox Marxism grants a position of insight and, based on that insight, a degree of authority that constitutes its normative force. The orthodox Marxist thinker, and the institutions of official Marxist leadership know how things “really are.” That detached, rationalistic objectivity constitutes its claim to be scientific: it is unquestionably true because events can be made to demonstrate the truth of its underlying structural laws time and time again. It is this specific conception of Marxist epistemological certainty to which the main thinkers of my dissertation—not only Algren and Ellison, but Althusser, Antonio Gramsci, and others—object *without rejecting outright the possibility of Marxist epistemological certainty or scientificity*.

Normative Marxism undertakes its elaboration of structural laws of historical and economic development in the name of proletarian revolution. But Marx’s proletariat is also not an empirical category: it is never just “the workers.” The proletariat instead names a potentiality of workers: the working-class as the world-historical agent of revolutionary transformation, conscious of that agency. *The Communist Manifesto* narrativizes history as the *bildung* of the proletariat, detailing its “birth” at the heart of capitalist production and culminating in its “death,” its revolutionary self-negation through the establishment of classless society. But this proletariat does not (yet) exist, since its emergence is identical with the final stages of class struggle and the onset of revolutionary transformation. The proletariat is thus a concept, one more imposed on concrete historical situations—to make them fit into place in the narrative of history—than derived from them. As André Gorz argues, the concept of the proletariat comes not out of Marx’s situated socioeconomic analyses, but from his training in German idealism: it names not real workers in real historical moments, but cloaks the Hegelian device of teleological negation (16-20). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri suggest that Marx’s

proletariat is not an existing entity to be named, but a “project” for the industrial working class to accomplish—it works as a political slogan, but doesn’t necessarily describe anything in concrete existence (104). What Marx constructs in the proletariat, therefore, is the very *conceptual* dynamism of his theory, the lynchpin concept that organizes and assigns meaning not only to that theory’s component parts, but to that theory’s real-world objectives. But because the term derives from the conceptual economy of Marx’s thought, it is at odds with the concrete reality of social situations pertaining in that real world. The lumpenproletariat, appearing on the margins of this central concept of the proletariat, embody all the diverse complexity of singular, real social formations that resist not just the categorical imposition of proletariat, but the entire explanatory apparatus of orthodox Marxism. The scandal of the lumpen—the ultimate source of Marx’s scorn for these underworld types—is that the appearance of the lumpen figure is itself identical with the conceptual instability and frustrating limitations (both epistemological and political) of Marxist theory.

Thus, I follow thinkers like Peter Stallybrass, Jeffrey Mehlman, and Jacques Rancière, who approach the lumpen not as a demographical object but as a conceptual problem. Drawing on Georges Bataille’s theory of the socially heterogeneous, Stallybrass reads Marx’s lumpenproletariat (against the grain of Marx’s intentions) as naming the fact of social heterogeneity itself and the necessity, for Marxism, of political articulation. The lumpenproletariat, as symptom, is a sign to Marxism that revolutionary political collectives don’t emerge of necessity from economic process, but must be organized out of the fluid social landscape. Stallybrass builds his argument in part on that of Jeffrey Mehlman, who proposes that the lumpenproletariat in Marx should be read as evidence of the “unassimilability to every dialectical totalization” of the social and the historical, as evidence of their irreducible heterogeneity (13). Something always escapes dialectical schematization and theoretical systematization, Mehlman suggests. Marx names that something the “lumpenproletariat.” For Mehlman, the non-specular lumpenproletariat emerges in Marx’s writing to rupture a simple specular dialectical opposition, between bourgeoisie and proletariat, and the epistemological assumptions rooted in that opposition.

Jacques Rancière argues that the lumpenproletariat in Marx is simply a “comic [mask]” used to “[disguise] the distance between worker and proletarian, the noncoincidence of the time of development and the time of revolution” (81). Actual, real workers, Rancière claims, have no place in Marxism: they are displaced by Marx’s *proletariat*, a conceptual negation of the worker. When Marx uses the term lumpenproletariat, he uses it to vilify *actual* workers who fail to be identical with the abstract concept of the proletariat. That scorn masks a theoretical frustration with those social figures that remain immersed in concrete diverse specificity rather than merge into the homogeneous collective of the proletariat. Prior to these deconstructive readings, discussion of the lumpenproletariat in Marx generally revolved around the question of their political capacity and assumed that the term was a more or less stable empirical object. Rancière, Stallybrass, and Mehlman, however, have variously linked the lumpenproletariat to the possibilities and limitations of Marxist theory itself. My dissertation is indebted to these theorizations, which make available the conceptual, intra-theoretical significance of the term. Rather than just a minor topic for Marxist political theory or historiography, the lumpenproletariat can now lead us to problems at the heart of Marxism itself. When the abstract laws of orthodox Marxism fail to adequately explain or comprehend historical events, the lumpenproletariat frequently occupies the space between that law and the event. It is the symptom, in orthodox Marxism, of things not going the way they should, and the resulting need to figure out a new, adequate theory.

Yet it’s important to stress that the lumpenproletariat is not an anti-Marxist concept: it provides a means for saving Marxism from its orthodox stagnation as ideology. After all, it is Marx who discovers, unconsciously, the practical theoretical mandate of the lumpenproletariat. His invocations of the lumpen identify it conceptually in terms of margin, exception, unknown, and excess. His contorted attempts to define the lumpenproletariat practically demonstrate its deconstructive role. Rather than just a cause for despair and frustration, the disruptions posed by the lumpenproletariat serve—for Algren and Ellison—as a mechanism for the development and innovation of Marxism, for perpetually moving Marxism past orthodoxy and into the productive activity of a living science.

This definition of Marxism as live theory—developing, reinventing, looking back on itself in order to look forward and outward—is Louis Althusser’s signature intervention within Marxist thought. Marxism was scientific, he argued, to the extent that it enabled the production of the new, both in thought and in political practice. Orthodox Marxism, for Althusser, was idealism cloaked in materialist vocabulary. It claimed to know all in advance, to see any event, no matter how apparently novel and disruptive, as merely another burst of the same. It was therefore not Marxist but Hegelian, retranslating difference into identity and making a Marxist the pontificator of what is, rather than the thinker of how to change what is. This idealistic “bad science,” codified in Stalin’s *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (1938), claimed scientific status on the grounds that it accurately reflected the essence of empirical reality. The solidity of that reflective bond between thought and reality often served modern Communist institutions by justifying their policies and programs as “scientific.” For Althusser, it made them politically ineffective, confining them to the Hegelian habit of seeing the same essence (whether one called it spirit, or the scientific laws of history, made no difference to Althusser) behind all phenomenon. Furthermore, it made Marxist theory into a simple empiricism, a simple accounting of what is. Lacking in normative Marxism was the possibility of thinking the novelty, the singular disruption, of revolution. “[T]here is not and cannot be a Hegelian politics,” he wrote (*For Marx* 204).

Instead, Althusser positioned innovative and situated theory as the genuinely scientific procedure of Marxism. Theory proceeds from and addresses the *conjuncture*, the singular array of discursive, social, and political contradictions of a given time and place. Like Marxist politics, Marxist thought happens in society, in a diversely-constituted historical moment, and not in the abstract. Its proper site is not the law, but the instance. As Althusser’s one-time collaborator Étienne Balibar explains by a mathematical analogy, this conjunctural immanentism is Marx’s own theoretical method properly understood: “what interests him [Marx] is not so much the *general form* the graph of history takes – the ‘integral,’ as it were – but the ‘*differential*,’ the ‘acceleration’-effect, and hence the relation of forces in play at any particular moment, determining the direction of its advance” (100-1). The properly materialist analysis asks not “how does the current situation reflect standing Marxist laws” but “how can we

properly understand the current situation, in its singular complexity, in order to instigate revolutionary change? What theoretical mechanisms or insights must we fashion in order to do this? What does Marxism claim to know and what does it not (yet) know?" When the lumpenproletarian figure appears in the fiction of Nelson Algren and Ralph Ellison, it does so precisely in relation to these authors' attempts to answer such questions in their own national and historical contexts.

### **From Huck Finn to the Black Panthers: the Lumpenproletariat in the U.S.**

Marxism and America's ideological notions of self-identity conflict most saliently around the matter of labor and the proletariat. The heroism of collective labor implied in orthodox Marxism's valorization of the proletariat is contested by American ideologies of individualism, self-fashioning, and historical exception. These cultural ideologies not only underwrite the romantic energy of the marginalized outsider in American literature, but they suggest that, with regard to orthodox Marxism, America is a singular exception. The assertion of American difference frequently underwrites national triumphalism and justifies imperialist ventures, but it's also a theoretical mandate that Lenin, Althusser, and Gramsci argued that the Marxist must apply to *any* nation in *any* historical moment. Exceptionalism is the only rule of Marxist practice, the general ground for determining what Marxism must think and do in a given conjuncture. American culture challenges orthodox Marxism on the grounds that a coherent class structure predicated on labor doesn't pertain in America, making America the exception to a politics implied to be tied to European social realities. For the writer and revolutionary seeking to work within and against American ideology, such constructions of difference need to be taken seriously rather than dismissed as mere illusions. Algren and Ellison's work, therefore, appropriates white ruling-class America's hegemonic narrative of why orthodox Marxism doesn't apply here, and uses it to theorize a proper Marxism *for* America.

Jon-Christian Suggs positions a paradigm of "romanticism"—a discursive matrix of "typologies of self, imagination, community, property, privacy, individualism, authenticity, innocence, and irony"—as hegemonic white America's understanding of its social identity (12). This romanticism emerges full-fledged in the nineteenth century and continues to be present in normative American discourse. Perhaps most familiarly, it is

present in the narrative of America as lacking established class boundaries and firmly-drawn lines of industrial class conflict. This narrative is certainly a myth, but its determining reality as myth, its presence in discourse and culture, cannot be overlooked. To quote James Baldwin: in America, “identity is almost impossible to achieve and people are perpetually attempting to find their feet on the shifting sands of status. (Consider the history of labor in a country in which, spiritually speaking, there are no workers, only candidates for the hand of the boss’s daughter)” (88). Even Marx wrote, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, that in America classes “have not yet become fixed, but continually change and interchange their elements in a constant state of flux.” This instability exists because “modern means of production, instead of coinciding with a stagnant surplus population, rather supply the relative deficiency of heads and hands,” and “the feverishly youthful movement of material production, that has a new world to make its own, has left neither time nor opportunity for abolishing the old spirit world” (22). Marx here puts a historical materialist spin on the American myth of utopian potentiality, historical innocence, and individual mobility. In *The Right to be Lazy* (an 1880 pamphlet nearly as popular in Europe as *The Communist Manifesto*), the French socialist Paul Lafargue (Marx’s son-in-law) implored European workers to reject heroic notions of labor and to follow the lead of America, where “the free and lazy American prefers a thousand deaths to the bovine life of the French peasant,” and where labor “is a pastime that is done while sitting, nonchalantly smoking a pipe” (26). The myth of a classless America can animate both nationalist ideology as well as productive political critique.

America’s ideological antithesis to structures of labor and production—and the reduction of individuality that those structures effect—generated anxiety about industry in the early United States. Alexis de Tocqueville, unexpectedly anticipating Marx, feared that the more specialized industrial work became in America, the more automatic and alienating it would become for the individual worker. This could cause individuals to become fixed in their labor positions, disrupt the social mobilities of democracy, and lead to the rise of static collective classes, a phenomenon that Tocqueville fears as the return of the American repressed: European aristocracy (645-48). The historically-innocent American individual would become the de-individuated member of the proletariat, an

occasion that Marx saw as progressive but that Tocqueville saw as negating the possibility of democracy: “one may say that as he, the workman, improves [in the specialized labor of his tasks], so does he, the man, lose his self-respect” (645).

In American studies, scholars have explored the consequences of relative class fluidity in the United States. Eric Schocket, Amy Schrager Lang, and Gavin Jones have documented the discursive inflections of class identity in America, where the lack of firmly established class boundaries makes class not non-existent, but a much more intricate matter of social and cultural articulation. America would seem to be almost an ideal site for thinking through the consequences of what Rancière argues is the truth concealed by Marx’s introduction of the lumpenproletariat: the “the distance between worker and proletarian,” the lack of fit between the abstract structural classes of orthodox Marxism and the on-the-ground, contingent complexities of socioeconomic process and formations.

The concept of the lumpenproletariat in many ways harmonizes with the vagaries of class and the ideological suspicion of labor in America, and it is a significant nodal point for the specifically American production of Marxist theory. In other words, the notion of the American exception can take radical as well as hegemonic forms. For example, one of the most important positive theorizations of the lumpenproletariat comes out of America. The Black Panther Party’s lumpen political orientation, articulated most cogently by Eldridge Cleaver in the pamphlet “On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party,” draws on and expands Frantz Fanon’s argument that the lumpen, in colonialist contexts, has the capacity for revolutionary agency. Cleaver works within the general framework of Marxism but declares: “O.K. We are Lumpen. Right on,” a statement by which he makes a clean break with Marxism’s suspicion of the lumpenproletariat (7). Cleaver’s lumpen are “all those who have no secure relationship or vested interest in the means of production and the institutions of capitalist society” whether because they have been economically disenfranchised or because they have entered into criminal modes of existence (7). Unlike the working class (both black and white), the lumpen—particularly the black lumpen, who suffer a double exteriorization at the hands of internal colonization—are not structurally part of the system itself: they are capable of revolution precisely *because* they are radically exteriorized, while the white and black working

classes have become merely “a new industrial elite” (9). Alongside a version of American romanticism, Cleaver suggests a reality that both Algren and Ellison confronted in their own fiction: that the racial peculiarities of the United States would have to be placed front and center in any attempt to rethink Marxism for America. Cleaver uses Marx’s concept of the lumpen to update Marxism for a specific situation, enabling him to rethink the process of revolution for a racially-structured, late capitalist conjuncture.

Not surprisingly, we find in American literature multiple instances of the non-laboring lumpenproletariat imbued with romantic, often sociopolitical potentiality. The dialectic of rags and paper confronts us, for example, in Hart Crane’s *The Bridge* (1933), when he describes the “wifeless or runaway / Hobo-trekkers,” transients excluded from social position, who are both limited by their material conditions (“Blind fists of nothing, humpty-dumpty clods”) and yet embody a potentiality within that limitation (“they touch something like a key perhaps”) (18). John Seelye argues that the image of the tramp in American literature often functions as a symptomatic critique of modern industrialization and collectivization: “the tramp’s restlessness is a parody of the dynamism of most Americans, whose energy whirls them into great configurations of static conformity.” Seelye notes that “the most comic thing about the tramp is the effort he expends in the avoidance of work. Work, for him, is the antithesis of freedom, and stands for conformity and boredom” (552).

Tom Sawyer demonstrates this critique of labor when he tricks his friends into white-washing Aunt Polly’s fence for him. “If he [Tom] had been a great and wise philosopher, like the writer of this book,” Twain’s narrator remarks, “he would now have comprehended that Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do and that Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do” (17). In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, the vagrant Huckleberry Finn’s attraction for Tom and the other socially-established boys is that Huck “came and went, at his own free will”: he is exterior to society’s cycles of necessity and compulsion, his life is one of autonomous activity free from the social, collective networks of labor. He is “hated and dreaded by all the mothers of the town, because he was idle.” “In a word, everything that goes to make life precious, that boy had. So thought every harassed, hampered, respectable boy in St. Petersburg” (49-50). As this novel and its famous sequel make clear, the rags that Huck is habitually dressed in,

rages that signal his marginalization from labor and the society structured upon labor, articulate possibility in the form of an exterior, moral critique of society and social convention. Hannah Arendt's philosophical critique of labor in *The Human Condition* (1958) as an experience of necessity, toil, and repetition that denied the worker the opportunity for free action in the political sphere is, in a more vernacular form, a commonplace of American cultural mythology.

This occupation with the conceptual matrix of limitation/possibility, exception/certainty, and marginalization/identity takes a different form in Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1903). Lambert Strether's solidified Victorian codes of moral behavior and duty are unsettled by his encounter with the Parisian literati (a group, we recall, that Marx included among the lumpenproletariat in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*). These bohemian artists and intellectuals prompt, for Strether, ongoing revisions of what he thinks he knows about life, society, and human beings. In this new Parisian world, Strether learns to rethink his understandings of the proper and the right, supplanting the a priori structural consistency of morals with the contingent indeterminacy of ethics. He also must realize that the non-laboring, non-productive, socially-unstable mode of the literati—a lifestyle anathema to Victorian standards of efficiency and productivity—offers Chad Newsome, the man Strether has come to “rescue” from Paris, richer opportunities for experience, sexual desire, and general *bildung* than would Chad's “proper” career in industrial production. The literati may lead very different material lives than hobo transients, but both occupy the conceptual place of Marx's lumpenproletariat, undoing the closure of established knowledge.

On the other hand, Stephen Crane's *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (1893) participates in the suspicious approach to the lumpen. At the end of the novel, the working-class Maggie is forced into prostitution after (unjustly) acquiring a reputation for promiscuity. In her final chapter, she is a nameless prostitute who is newly “free” to roam the streets of New York at will and alone, in search of trade. Yet this freedom is precarious, as it is bought by radical marginalization from the social structure: Maggie looks at the “shutters of the tall buildings” that are “closed like grim lips. The *structures* seemed to have eyes that looked over her, beyond her, at other things” (62, emphasis added). She meets her demise at the hands of a lascivious, gross man who is able to

victimize her precisely because of her “free” isolation from the social. The ending is ambiguous, but Maggie seems to perish by the river, which is “lit for a moment” by the “yellow glare” of a “hidden factory” (63). Hardly romantic, Crane realizes that lumpen marginalization offers not freedom and possibility but an exteriorization from the legitimate structures of capitalism entailing only social and physical death.

What does it mean to be classless—to be outside of social formation, to be in excess, to be marginal? Is it a position of renewal, or of social death? Marxism, with the concept of the lumpenproletariat, brings these questions into the thinking of social ontology and revolutionary strategy. But American ideology and literary tradition offer supplemental resources to the committed writer who attempts to answer these questions in America. When a text tries to think the consequences of the socially outcast, the ideologically unacceptable, the theoretical exception or unknown, or the instance that challenges the rule, the figures Marx named lumpenproletarian tend to emerge within it, reminding us of the proximity of its pages to rags and inviting us to question again how and where the literary practice of writing meets the problem of material and epistemological exteriority.

### **For Althusser, For Zola**

In each chapter of my dissertation, I make use of Althusserian theory as a framework for reading Algren, Ellison, and their sociohistorical contexts. Since each chapter motivates or emphasizes a distinct theme within Althusser’s thought, I reserve full explication of those themes for the chapters themselves. Here, however, I’d like to initially acknowledge some potential objections to my reliance on Althusser’s work in a study involved with U.S. and African-American literature and culture. Althusser never attended in any sustained manner to the United States, to questions of racial identity and racial power relations, or to literature. Furthermore, because his major writings were undertaken in the 1960s and after, they post-date Algren and Ellison’s most important fiction as well as the 1930s-1950s historical period of my study. Nonetheless, as I hope to make clear in the following chapters, to foreclose upon Althusser as anachronistic or otherwise irrelevant to Algren, Ellison, and mid-century U.S. contexts is to sacrifice an incisive critical theoretical instrument in the name of an overly-rigid historicism. Algren

and Ellison's fiction explores sociopolitical and epistemological issues within literary form that Althusser helpfully and illuminatingly approaches within theory: bringing these three writers together allows for new interpretations and new critical framings of each. More importantly, Althusser provides a redefinition of Marxism as an inventive theoretical work that situates productivity, heterodoxy, non-reflectivity, mobility, and contingency as constitutive of Marxist engagement itself. When applied to literary study in our academic moment (when proletarian naturalist or didactic literary genres have lost their sociohistorical purchase), Althusserianism makes visible the contours of an alternative, sophisticated, and in many ways *current* Marxist aesthetic practice operating in Algren and Ellison's fiction. In other words, he provides the Marxist theoretical vocabulary necessary for locating a non-proletarian, non-realist or non-referential, and non-orthodox Marxist literary project in their writings.

While Althusser may not have explicitly addressed U.S. contexts in his own work, he provided a general conceptual armature designed to enable—to compel—Marxist thought toward specific national, social, and cultural levels of analysis. Thus, in 1965 he was able to see that the African-American church played an important role in animating the Civil Rights struggle against racism in the United States, and that any attempt to understand the stakes and potentials of that struggle would have to take that role into account. Toward the end of his life, he found more revolutionary potential in Latin American liberation theology and other popular national movements than in traditional socialist political organization (*Philosophy* 27; *Future* 225-6). He didn't theorize African-American positionality within the United States, or the revolutionary capacities of literary form, or the lumpenproletariat as a social body: instead, he theorized the general methods and concepts a Marxist would need *in order to* address effectively those objects. He thus enables us to see how Algren and Ellison do that conjuncturally-applied intellectual work within the formal bounds of the literary and how their project constitutes a non-historically-delimited, still-generative practice of Marxist writing.

However, I'm sure this account of Althusser will sound unusual to readers accustomed to his theoretical reputation (or caricature) as either a philosophical elite or a semi-Stalinist hard-liner. Although Althusser's work has provided English departments with a conceptual vocabulary (literary *production*, social and ideological *articulation*,

*relative autonomy, interpellation, the social substantiality of ideology*) that has become more or less general, it is commonplace to critique Althusser for being too rigid, too dogmatic, too philosophical, too elitist. Yet as I show in the course of this dissertation, the charge that Althusser's theory of ideology makes no room for subjective resistance, the charge that his scene of interpellation is overly programmatic (or blind to the racial or gendered particularities of the one being "hailed"), and the charge that he smugly restricts truth to the provenance of intellectuals, are wholly inaccurate.

Among Marxists—particularly British Marxists like E.P. Thompson—Althusser has been seen as a dogmatist trying to resurrect the specter of the elite Marxist intellectual who knows more than the benighted masses. He has been seen as willfully or clumsily evacuating what many Marxists—particularly Raymond Williams—see as the vibrant humanistic spirit of Marx's work and the fundamentally working-class populist energy of Marxism. His critiques of humanism, and his delineation of the ideological nature of subjectivity, have been dismissed as mere misreadings of Marx, or even—in a particularly ludicrous *ad hominem* notion of Francis Wheen's—as an explanation of his lack of responsibility for killing his wife (109). By bringing Althusser's concepts and projects into my reading of Algren and Ellison, I hope to suggest by demonstration some better ways of reading Althusser and of putting his work in dialogue with U.S. and African-American literature and culture.

Within Marxist literary theory itself, I wish to make a related intervention. Ever since Pierre Macherey did the work of taking Althusser's thought and applying it to literary analysis, Marxist critics have tended to assume that the structural relation of ideology to literature is where Althusserian thought is best applied to literary studies. Macherey, and later Terry Eagleton (in *Criticism and Ideology*) and Fredric Jameson (in *The Political Unconscious*), approach literary texts as unconscious demystifications of ideology. The text, they assume, is saturated with ideology: it participates, to an extent, in capitalism's larger (mis)representational project of shoring up the apparent naturalness, inevitability, or good of capitalism's oppressive social arrangements. However, because of its distinctly literary form, it nonetheless makes visible to the discerning critic the seams or fault lines of that ideology. Macherey, Eagleton, and Jameson give us a range of

complex tools and strategies for unlocking a text's unconscious, formal reflective engagement with its contexts.

This mode of reading literature has an impressive lineage in Marxism, traceable back to Marx and Engels themselves. Both preferred realist literature that forsook partisanship in the name of broad representation: only such faithfully inclusive texts could offer a full reflection of the contours of the text's historical moment. Engels wrote that he learned more about French society from Balzac than from "all the professed historians, economists and statisticians of the period together" (40). Balzac—as the representative realist—is something of a literary hero to Marx and Engels, and to Lukács as well. His work is good, according to these thinkers, because it is objectively realistic and thus does well what these thinkers thought literature should do: document or otherwise make cognitively available the extra-literary. Émile Zola—as a representative figure of the political writer—is, by comparison, frequently denigrated by Marxist literary theory. He may have "better" political views than Balzac, but he writes novels in order to expound a priori sociopolitical positions. As such, his works are limited and narrow in scope, unable to serve as broad indexes of their moment. Macherey and his theoretical descendents have largely updated, with a more precise theoretical vocabulary and with more focus on form, this assumption about the proper ontology and role of the literary text: it reflects, frames, makes visible its material and ideological location. Lukács's critiques of naturalism (by which he referenced didactic protest literature as well as canonical naturalism) and modernist expressionism stem from a related assumption: only realism has the proper scope and representational protocols to be able to inform the reader about the social totality of capitalism. This reflectionism has tended to mean that Marxism has generally been uninterested in the workings of purposive, "thesis-driven" fiction or in the theoretically-productive projects of politically-concerned texts.

My dissertation does not prioritize a critique of this tradition of Marxist literary theory and in fact incorporates the tradition at multiple points. However, I depart from it by applying a different Althusserian concept, that of theoretical practice, to the production of literature. I am interested less in what texts tell us about their ideological or sociohistorical contexts than in what texts seek to do within those contexts. Rather than approach texts as second-order reflections of the fissures of ideology at a given historical

moment, I read them as *attempts to practice theory in literary form*, efforts by historically-situated writers to *figure something out* unrestrained by dogmatic assumptions or traditional leftist tenets. Conceptualizing this literary dynamism and theoretical productivity within Marxism, when it often has reason to depart from the normative terms of orthodox Marxist language, is where Althusser's concept of theoretical practice is most helpful. His model of theoretical practice is explicated in greater detail in the following chapters, but briefly, it consists of an intra-theoretical labor in which raw materials (existing experiences, knowledges, and representations) are worked over in order to produce new knowledge that can be scientific or ideological, revolutionary or reactionary, depending on the purpose for which the raw materials are processed. Specifically, scientific theoretical practice—Marxism proper—seeks to produce genuinely new, ruptural, paradigm-shifting epistemological gains; ideological theoretical practice seeks to produce, in the guise of “knowledge,” ideological justifications of the status quo. The structure of thought with which a thinker performs theoretical practice—the thinker's problematic—determines the truth-value and political orientation of the products of that practice. Marxism, Althusser establishes, is a process of work rather than a set of ideas, positions, or representations. In this sense, Marxism is content-less and thus incapable of being *contented*: it is always in motion, revision, and reinvention, always interrogating itself for points of raggedness that can point the way for new developments.

If we take this model and apply it to the writing of literature, thereby construing the scene of writing as an Althusserian *practice*, it offers some exciting directions for criticism and biography. For one, it allows us to see authors materially, as producers of theory. By reconstructing the problematic out of which a writer works when figuring (out) theory in literature, we have access to a non-humanist model of literary biography. Finally, translating theoretical practice into the specifics of literature and writing enables us to correlate literary form with political and epistemological purpose, to foreground the specifically literary properties of a text in the name of critical theory and politics. A text doesn't represent. Rather, it *figures*, in both the literary-craftsmanship and cognitive-production senses of the term. Algren and Ellison, I argue, are Marxist theorists laboring to produce knowledge with the specific discipline and tools of their craft—and as

Marxists in this Althusserian sense, their practice is related to but ultimately autonomous from and unconstrained by mid-century Communist Party politics and discourse. Thus, in attributing Marxism to Ellison and theoretical capacity to Algren, I hope to undermine some sedimented critical assumptions about each writer.

### **Algren, Ellison, and the American Literary Left**

The study of the literary output of the Old Left—the radical cultural and political formation led by the American Communist Party from roughly 1929 to 1956—has been a small yet productive sub-field of U.S. literary studies. Since Walter Rideout penned his groundbreaking 1956 study of the radical American novel, and Daniel Aaron offered the first fair-minded history of Communist literary debates in 1961, scholars working in this field have debunked a host of pejorative Cold War-era assumptions about radicalism in American literature. In a series of important studies, Alan Wald has expanded our picture of American literary radicalism, tracing the political commitment of writers associated with other leftist groups besides the Communist Party; recovering a wide range of radical writers from numerous identity positions; uncovering the hidden affinities of certain canonical American writers with the left; and demonstrating that radical writers worked in nearly every literary genre of the mid-century period, from high modernism to pulp fiction. Above all, his literary histories have captured the lived complexity of the radical writer's biography: Wald shows that literary commitment in the United States was a complex and multi-faceted calculus of personal decisions, political questioning, and institutional and social transactions.

Other scholars have attended to the textual properties of proletarian literature, the semi-official Communist literary project that took shape during the Depression and set the tone for Old Left literary production. Cary Nelson has exhumed a wide range of radical poets of the Old Left, working to efface the literary historical divide between “good” modernist poetics and “bad” propaganda poetry. Barbara Foley, in her 1993 study *Radical Representations*, has demonstrated the formal range and inventiveness of proletarian literature, producing a taxonomy of the proletarian novel. Paula Rabinowitz has explored the formal and theoretical work of Depression-era proletarian women writers, arguing for their complex syntheses of class and gender-based critiques of

capitalism. A host of brilliant studies of the mid-twentieth-century African-American literary left—by scholars like William Maxwell, James Smethurst, Bill Mullen, and Kate Baldwin—have demonstrated the complexity and value of the Old Left’s approach to racial identity and racial oppression in the United States. Rita Barnard in her 1996 study of Nathanael West and proletarian poet Kenneth Fearing, and William Solomon in his 2002 study of Depression literature, entertainment, and technology, have both put Old Left writers in conversation with paradigms in postmodern critical theory.

In my dissertation I aim to combine the best work and initiatives of this field. While literary history, authorial biography, literary form, and critical theory have all been brought into this scholarly field, I combine them while attempting to compromise none. In order to understand how a politically-engaged writer writes—how he/she *produces* a literary text and a set of theoretical insights within a contingent historical situation—we must attend to the circumstances of the writer’s biography, the singular and specific manner by which he/she interacted with historical and social contexts, and the formal and epistemological work of his/her writing. Previous studies of radical writing tend to be either biographical, with little sustained textual analysis, or narrowly analytical, focused only on a small selection of a writer’s work. Proletarian literary studies also tends to be narrowly periodized, frequently delimiting its study of writers and texts to the 1930s and 1940s and relying solely on that period’s specific range of political positions when describing the political identities of those writers and texts. In other words, a novel’s or writer’s politics are frequently delineated by reference to mid-century Communist-Party positions or literary tendencies (as we’ll see, this has been the case with Ralph Ellison’s critical treatment by scholars of the left). While such historically-contingent contexts are crucial to any mode of literary analysis, their privileging here threatens to limit the study of mid-century leftist writing to an exercise in historical documentation and recovery. By attending to the diachronic development of a writer’s life and work, I seek a fuller picture of what being a Marxist writer meant in twentieth-century America, particularly in terms of the intellectual and craft-based decisions of singular authors. By making considerable use of Marxist critical theory (both of the mid-century period and after), I want to distinguish a trans-historical Marxist aesthetic practice from the historically-local terms in which leftist literary politics has been defined. So while I pay close attention to the

positions, discourses, and literary strategies associated with the 1930s-1950s Communist left and proletarian literature to the extent that they served as resources, inspirations, or obstacles to Algren and Ellison's projects, I resist situating their literary politics entirely *within* those contextual terms.

Ultimately, I am not primarily interested in defending radical literature, the Communist Party, or politically-marginalized writers; nor am I focused on seeing how such literature documents the conditions of the Depression, say, or of modernity in America; nor am I here concerned with the ongoing project of recovering radical writers lost to literary history. Rather, I am exploring the stakes of politically-purposive writing itself: what knowledge can such literary texts produce? How do they produce it? How does an engaged writer work within historical, discursive, and institutional contexts without his work being simply a reflection of those contexts? My dissertation could be read as a recovery, not of lost writers and texts, but of the complexities and singularities of properly Marxist literary practice.

I turn to Algren and Ellison to do this exploration, even though Algren and Ellison will strike many of my readers as an unlikely pairing. When he is remembered at all in today's academy, Algren is generally remembered as a minor figure, a formally-uninteresting naturalist, a Chicago regional writer fond of the seamy side of urban life but offering little more than sensation. Ralph Ellison is, of course, the author of perhaps the century's most admired American novel, an accomplished literary craftsman, a brilliant explicator of his own work and of the complexities of American culture and society, a staunch critic of Marxism, and a defender of pluralist American democracy. Yet a simple recounting of the facts alone starts to defamiliarize these established reputations. While I know of no indication that they knew each other, much less thought anything of each other's work, their lives and work intersect in a surprisingly large number of ways.

In the Depression years, Algren and Ellison were contemporaries, loyal to the Communist Party and publishing in the same leftist journals. They were both friends of, and mentored by, Richard Wright. *Native Son* (the title was Algren's own invention, a rejected title of his first novel given to Wright) inspired Algren to write his second novel, and would also be a major influence on Ralph Ellison's entire approach to writing. Algren, nominally Jewish-American, created an African-American activist as the figure

of Communist political and moral authority in his first novel. In his first short story, Ellison crafted a Jewish hobo from Brooklyn as the figure of the revolutionary Communist agent. Throughout their careers, both wrote of hoboes and social outcasts, and both invested African-American culture and identity with real and symbolic political significance. While both eventually moved away from the Communist movement, both continued to think and write in identifiably Marxist ways.

Furthermore, both writers did ethnographic work for the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s and 1940s, Algren in Illinois and Ellison in New York. Both attended conferences of the Communist-backed League of American Writers. Both toyed with the idea of volunteering to fight for the Spanish Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. During World War II, both were skeptical of the Allies' proclaimed anti-fascist idealism. Looking to the segregation of the U.S. military and the continuation of domestic Jim Crow, both suspected the war was really about imperialist expansion. Both distanced themselves during the war from the Communist Party, which was wholeheartedly and uncritically supportive of the Roosevelt administration's war policies. After the war, both were, for a time, prominent figures in the postwar literary landscape: Algren's *The Man with the Golden Arm* won the first National Book Award in 1950, and Ellison's *Invisible Man* won it three years later. However, their reputations then diverged. While Ellison came to prominence as a liberal anticommunist and modernist writer, Algren was increasingly seen as a social-protest relic. Accordingly, they have very different statuses today within the academy. But in their biographies, personal transactions, dealings with Communism, correlations of race and ethnicity with radical politics, interest in socioeconomic outsiders, and attempts to understand the complex historical events of the 1930s-1950s, Algren and Ellison converge to a surprising extent.

Nelson Algren and Ralph Ellison put to work the deconstructive and theoretically-generative mechanism of the ragged, lumpenproletarian figure in order to figure (out), in their writing, Marxist answers to the problems of mid-twentieth-century America. As a result, their writing is a fresh, interesting, and sophisticated version of literary radicalism. Their works are invaluable American contributions to Marxism, on par with those of some of the more familiar names in the pantheon of Western Marxist theory. My dissertation thus makes three general interventions in American and African-

American literary studies. First, I recast the reputations of two of America's most interesting modern writers, offering fresh readings, contexts, and archival research in order to generate new conversations about both. Secondly, I expand our understanding of radical American fiction, suggesting that it was not simply a Depression-specific experiment, arguing for its epistemological productivity, and recovering the complexity of its engagement with Communism, American ideology, and its own historical contexts. Finally, I identify confluences and points of reciprocal illumination between themes and concerns in African-American literary studies and literary history, and those in Althusserian Marxism. I argue for the fundamental resourcefulness, to American Marxist thought, of black expression and black cultural epistemologies, and I bring forward some shared investments and disciplinary procedures of Marxism and African-American studies. Additionally, by locating Ralph Ellison's work and career—including *Invisible Man*—not against the left (where critical consensus has placed them) but *within* an alternative Marxist aesthetic that also incorporates the symbolic, politically-motivated implementations of blackness found in Nelson Algren's work, I hope to open up further lines of inquiry into, and offer fresh perspectives on, the nexus of racial and textual politics that all studies of U.S. literary and cultural contexts necessarily confront.

Beyond American studies, I hope my dissertation will introduce the concept of the lumpenproletariat to literary studies by providing a set of assumptions and interpretational protocols to bring to bear on the presence of ragged, marginal figures in literature. Marxism has furnished literary studies with a host of productive concepts and methodologies already. The lumpenproletariat not only adds itself to those gains, but compels us to look at Marxism and its American (literary) manifestations again and to reconsider what we think we know about the capacities, relevance, and usefulness of both. This compulsion is the deconstructive role the lumpenproletariat can play within the academy: to render ragged our convictions about Marxism and literature, to unravel a few loose threads and lead us somewhere else.

### **Advice to Readers**

The full explication of the arguments and critical dialogues introduced here occurs in the dissertation chapters themselves, where they are developed cumulatively

and diachronically and where claims and ideas discussed here receive further treatment. Therefore, the five chapters of the dissertation should not be read as stand-alone, self-contained essays but as stages in a continuous, sequentially-developing argument. Skipping the Algren chapters for those on Ellison, for instance, will leave the reader lacking key terms and frameworks introduced in the earlier chapters. Similarly, skipping the chapter on Ellison's 1930s work for the chapter on *Invisible Man* will deprive the reader of insights into Ellison's writing and politics needed to follow the ensuing interpretation of his most famous novel.

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## Chapter 1

### **Starting Out in the Thirties: Nelson Algren and the Depression Lumpenproletariat**

Throughout his writing career, Nelson Algren was fascinated by criminality and the apparatuses of the American legal system: the police, courts, jails, and prisons of mid-twentieth-century America feature in all his major writings. He didn't use them as sensationalist plot elements or as *noir* décor, but as a means of figuratively analyzing the social operations of American capitalism. That is, the figurative language of crime and punishment is often how Algren's fiction renders the overdetermined, hard-to-parse yet undeniably oppressive structural workings of American capitalism.

In Algren's second novel, *Never Come Morning* (1942), Steffi Rostenkowski is confined in a brothel by a local underworld operator of Chicago's Polish-American Division Street neighborhood. She has been brutally raped by the neighborhood's juvenile gang and consequently imprisoned by Bonifacy Konstantine, the gang's small-time underworld patron. Yet there is something excessive about her confinement. Its ontology, as well as its objective function, seems to exceed its literal determination by the novel's plot. Although Steffi and her boyfriend Bruno Bicek will ultimately try to escape the inner city and defy the authority of the underworld and police alike, she intuits that her confinement somehow exceeds its immediate causation in Bonifacy's tyranny. Algren renders, in free indirect discourse, her attempt to represent this *overdetermination* of her subject position: "Everyone was alone, trapped in the same vast beer flat forever . . . like convicts living in the same cell for years together. All were in on the same charge, and the charge was a bum rap for all of them. Everyone was in on a bum rap; not one would be paroled" (215). Steffi's thoughts transcend the level of the literal: she uses the stuff of her social surroundings and reworks them into a figurative expression of the social structure governing those surroundings.

The language of carceral punishment is here the grounds on which Algren the narrator can meet the lumpenproletarian character. The resulting figure, articulated in the

shared space of free indirect discourse, crosses conceptual binaries: the feminine space of the brothel slides into the masculine space of the jail, and the illegitimate criminal underworld becomes indistinguishable from the legitimate legal apparatus. The mobility of the metaphor depicts the intellectual generalization that Steffi's (and Algren's) mental processes enact: here, theorizing the social overdetermination of her position requires Steffi to make a cognitive totalization, to relate her immediate experience to contiguous and then general levels of social significance. The language of crime and punishment represents the functional unity of the social structure: binaries of prostitution and the justice system, the brothel and the jail, become synecdochic figurations of totality. Steffi grasps the structure in which she is located as first a "vast beer flat" and then a mass prison cell: her figurative ingenuity compensates for the empirical imprecision of this realization.

We know, of course, that this identification of Algren with Steffi through free indirect discourse is only a conceit. Yet it is a conceit that reflects on its own nature as a conceit. In this passage, Algren writes the lumpenproletarian character as the originator, or "writer" of the figurative work of the passage. Steffi is a lumpen figure whose mental and linguistic expansion upon her experience figures—or *writes*—the novel's social analysis at this point. Reviewing the novel in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Benjamin Appel praised the text for bringing to light "one of our big industries—the crime racket." Appel means that the novel reveals the crime racket *to be* a "big industry" and vice-versa. That is, the novel demonstrates the structural contiguity between "the millionaire receivers of the take" at the center of the social galaxy; the orbiting "satellites" of political, financial, and juridical figures; and finally, the lumpen who live "way out in space," the "industry's bread and butter strong-arm lads, the poolroom sharks, the whores" who "take their obscure places in the brothels and in the stolen cars" (7). Yet Appel overlooks the fact that the very sights and sounds of those "obscure places"—brothels, beer flats, prisons cells—serve as raw materials for the figurative work, the synecdochic movement, that makes visible their structural relations to the social center.<sup>1</sup> Algren offers a Marxist sociopolitical analysis from out of the visceral experiences of lumpenproletarian life.

It is a sign of Algren's considerable self-awareness that he defined American literature itself (or at least how he thought it should be written) as "the woman in the courtroom who, finding herself undefended on a charge, asked, 'Isn't anybody on my side?'" (Donohue 279). Algren's metaphor is suggestive but not, at first reading, strictly coherent: the alignment between the tenor (American literature) and a vehicle drawn from the presumed content or substance of American literature evacuates the role of the author. What Algren's figure ends up saying is essentially that American literature emerges every time the victims of American society plead the bare fact of their victimization. Algren's career was forged in the Communist milieu of the 1930s proletarian literary movement, but Algren never saw the American working class as these victims. The social group who had no one and nothing on its side—not labor union leaders, not the Communist Party, not the entire theoretical tradition of Marxism—was the socially-exteriorized lumpenproletariat. As Louis Althusser would later clarify, the proletariat can be a revolutionary agent in part because it is not "*the most* exploited class, or *the most* wretched social 'stratum'": rather, it is the lumpen who are "the most wretched of men" ("Reply to John Lewis" 46-7). No one but the writer is on their side: they fall between the cracks or hover on the edges of class conflict as they pursue socially-illicit means of survival. Algren would often employ criminal figurations to render the shared identity of the writer and the "most wretched." For instance, in the 1950s, against a trend of social conformity in American letters and elsewhere, he insisted that "[a] certain ruthlessness and a sense of alienation from society is as essential to creative writing as it is to armed robbery" (*Nonconformity* 34).

The figure of the author, then, hasn't dropped out of Algren's definition—he has simply become identified with the "woman in the courtroom." He has—in terms of a *project* of literary production—taken her side. Nelson Algren's literary career was an intricate putting-to-work of this lumpenproletarian representational literary project across three charged sociopolitical conjunctures: the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the domestic Cold War. By conjuncture (a key concept for my analysis of the epistemological and political labors of Algren's fiction) I refer to the peculiar specificity of sociopolitical arrangements and relations at a given historical instant. For Lenin, and later for Louis Althusser, the social conjuncture is the immanent scene of Marxist

thought, whose end is political action attuned to the material realities of the conjuncture. Algren engaged in an ongoing, shifting, at times self-correcting analysis of the status—both social and psychological—of the lumpenproletariat in these different conjunctures.

In his Depression-era work, Algren explores how the experience of the lumpenproletariat prevents them from attaining political knowledge. *Somebody in Boots* (1935), Algren's only novel of the 1930s, renders the epistemological opacity of lumpen experience and the resulting cognitive limitations of the lumpenproletariat. Yet Algren does not simply document cognitively-delimited lumpenproletarian characters. Rather, the dynamics of the text itself put to work that limitation on the figural level. In line with Algren's definition of American literature, *Somebody in Boots* dramatizes, on the level of its formal composition, the breakdown or failure of adequate theoretical cognition that also plagues its characters. It is a narrative of lumpenproletarian ignorance and the complex consequences of that ignorance for the chances of proletarian revolutionary transformation. In this endeavor, however, the novel realizes the epistemological capacities of figurative language. By locating himself as author amongst the lumpen, and accordingly attempting to render the cognitive inability of the lumpen in figurative terms, Algren discovers a register of veridicality immanent to the complex movements, ambiguities, and productive contradictions of literary language. As the example of Steffi's grasping insight suggests, Algren would, in later works, posit the possibilities of the *figural* contours (if not the *actual* experiences or consciousnesses) of the American lumpenproletariat. Through re-figurings of the lumpen in *The Neon Wilderness* (1947) and *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1949), Algren produced cognitive insights into the structure and operations of American capitalism, and he tried to think through political options and alternatives in social conjunctures far removed from the Depression. In keeping with his insistence that American literature must *be* the lumpenproletariat, Algren's texts model themselves as the figurative renderings of the relative cognitive and agential capacities of the lumpenproletariat—the sociopolitical consciousness of the lumpen rendered as poetry. In this endeavor, Algren formulates one of the most unique, productive, and intricate literary projects of any American writer.

As a result, Algren merits a place in American literary history as the pre-eminent novelist of the lumpenproletariat and as one of America's most important Marxist

sociopolitical theorists, albeit one operating with the practical procedures of literature. Traditionally, critics have not been impressed with Algren as a thinker. Estimations like Leslie Fiedler's, that Algren is "a political writer and a moralist" whose "politics is largely sentiment and his morality pure corn" (43), or Chester Eisinger's, that Algren was too sentimental to "come into a meaningful relationship with a body of idea" (75), still seem to govern Algren's status as a minor writer. That minority is the reward granted by the American cultural establishment to one of its most dissident writers. Algren's literary-historical marginalization is not so much an objective evaluation of such mystified standards as the quality of his prose or the suppleness of his moral imagination, but rather a demonstration of the obstacles facing the Marxist writer in America. As Lenin wrote in 1920, referring specifically to America and Western Europe, it is both "difficult" and "precious" to "be a revolutionary when the conditions for direct, open, really mass and really revolutionary struggle *do not yet exist*, to be able to champion the interests of the revolution...in non-revolutionary bodies, and quite often in downright reactionary bodies, in a non-revolutionary situation, among the masses who are incapable of immediately appreciating the need for revolutionary methods of action" (612). As someone who sought to work out the prospects or chances for revolutionary transformation in the United States against precepts of the "official" proletarianism of the 1930s left as well those of hegemonic bourgeois ideology, Algren may have glimpsed himself in Lenin's words.

I refer both to Algren's literary "project" (a motivated term in Jean-Paul Sartre's Marxism) and to the Althusserian concept of Algren's "problematic." While Sartre and Althusser are usually understood as antagonists, I believe that their concepts are, in this case, productively combined for literary-biographical analysis. Sartre's project describes an action "determined both in relation to the real and present factors which condition it and in relation to a certain object, still to come, which it is trying to bring into being" (91). It thus "represents *in itself* the moving unity of subjectivity and objectivity" (97). In other words, it is the subjective action of an individual within preset objective limits that nonetheless works with, against, and beyond those limits. It is the individual's "power to go beyond his situation by means of work and action" (99). Sartre's concept of the project allows the critic to approach the work of individual writers *as* projects, to

recognize the *combination* of both objective determinants and subjective (personal or biographical) motivations that compose a text. But a project should not be read as merely the conscious *intentions* of the actor (in the sense that the “intentional fallacy” proscribes from literary studies): rather, it is the objective progressive movement *as evident in the work produced*, that must be read backwards (regressively) from the accomplished endpoint of that movement, i.e., from the work itself (85-166). Althusser’s problematic is the underlying enabling structure of any mode of production of knowledge, whether ideological or epistemological. It constitutes the “horizon” of a theorist’s practice and is “the absolute determination of *the forms in which all problems must be posed*” (Althusser and Balibar 25). Here, I use “problematic” to refer to the figurative and representational horizons of Algren’s literary practice. If Algren’s project was the production of Marxist theory by a complex and shifting process of figuring from the lumpenproletariat and lumpenproletarian experience, his problematic was roughly defined by Marxism’s conceptualization of the lumpenproletariat as naming the marginal, exterior, nebulous figures on the borders of the social. The project and the problematic are invaluable concepts to Marxist literary criticism, enabling the Marxist critic to understand the concrete theoretical intentions born out in an author’s literary practice without recourse to anthropocentric humanist accounts of literary creation.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I draw on Louis Althusser’s understandings of epistemology, ideology, and political practice to provide a framework for understanding the theoretical agendas of Nelson Algren’s literary practice. I then locate the origins of Algren’s figurative/epistemological strategies in the material, political, and discursive parameters of the 1930s and in Algren’s biographical encounters with that conjuncture. Finally, I proceed to a reading of Algren’s formal and political treatment of the lumpenproletariat in *Somebody in Boots*.

### **“The Last of the Proletarian Writers”: Algren and the Critics**

Critical debates on Nelson Algren have generally revolved around the interrelation of his work’s generic location, aesthetic quality, and sociopolitical investments.<sup>3</sup> His critical fortunes have also tended to shift with the sociopolitical climate, and estimations of Algren have tended to reflect the political priorities of the

critic. The Communist left lauded Algren's first novel, *Somebody in Boots* (1935), with admiring reviews in the *New Masses*, the *Daily Worker*, and *Partisan Review* (Conroy, Hayes, Rahv). The mainstream press was less enthusiastic. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* felt that Algren overplayed the "horror" of life on the bum, offering "social criticism which is so violent that it loses its force," while the *New York Times* reviewer suggested that the book's "sub-humans" were not "fair representatives" of the unemployed (Butcher, Boynton). In other words, how one responded to the novel's hard-hitting rendition of the ravages of the Depression was inflected in no small part by one's general understanding of the material extent and political nature of the Depression.

Politically-tinged evaluations continued into the postwar period, even though Algren's fiction in this moment was less explicitly leftist or pro-Communist in its content. Richard Wright told Algren that he was "the best writer of good prose in the U.S.A." in 1940 (Drew 121), but a critical consensus against Algren began to develop in the postwar period. Critics like Leslie Fielder and Norman Podhoretz criticized Algren's work for being caught up in the polemics and styles of the 1930s and thus politically and aesthetically dated. In 1956, Fielder called him "a museum piece—the Last of the Proletarian Writers" who was "isolated from the life of his time" (43). Of course, as Lawrence Lipton pointed out in a 1957 defense of Algren's work, Fielder's claim depended on the assumption that postwar America was, in Lipton's sardonic words, the land of "Permanent Prosperity, the New Capitalism, the Highest Standard of Living in the World, in short, the world of Cash McCall and the Man in the Grey Flannel Suit" (5).

Generally, critics of the era found the substance of Algren's political outlook unimpressive. Chester Eisinger described Algren's politics as "sheer sentimental sympathy for the underdog" born out of an "indifference to the intellect" (75). For Podhoretz, Algren's position was: "if you're on the side of Society, you're bad, and if you're an outcast or a misfit, you're good, and that's all there is to it" (137). The Communist left of this period was still generally sympathetic to Algren, but was sometimes troubled by the lack of explicit, didactic social content in his work. Robert Friedman complained in the *Daily Worker* that *The Man with the Golden Arm* failed to indict capitalism for the fate of the novel's characters, while Sidney Finkelstein, reviewing the same novel in *Masses & Mainstream*, lamented that it didn't represent the

inner-city slums as politically active. In one of the most influential 1950s readings of Algren, George Bluestone denied that Algren's work had any political priorities: "If Algren ever felt the efficacy of social amelioration, he both posed and rejected it in his first book" (43). Instead, according to Bluestone, Algren honed a modernist aesthetic lyricism out of apolitical themes of the human condition. Yet in 1953, the leftist critic Maxwell Geismar defended the political Nelson Algren, positioning him as "a solid and enduring part of the American heritage of dissent," even as that literary tradition "is unfashionable today" (315).

The few contemporary critical readings of Algren are generally favorable, but they often re-evaluate his reputation by positing a discontinuity between his 1930s work and his postwar work, between an earlier social-protest agenda and a later, mature aesthetic rendering of the contours of modern urban subjectivity. Traces of this assumption appear in monographs such as James Giles's *Confronting the Horror* and Carlo Rotella's *October Cities*, as well as in Robert Ward's recent edited volume of critical essays on Algren. On the other hand, Carla Cappetti, Ian Peddie, William Maxwell, and William Solomon have, with remarkable critical sophistication, attended to the cognitive and sociopolitical aspects of Algren's fiction, with productive results. Nonetheless, their studies are often limited by their exclusive focus on individual texts. Cappetti offers an exciting reading of *Never Come Morning* as a document combining empirical sociology with modernist aesthetics in order to map the social spaces of Chicago, and Maxwell and Solomon explore the ways *Somebody in Boots* dialogues critically with elements of both Communist and hegemonic American discourse in the 1930s. While these readings of Algren's novels are by far the most sophisticated yet produced, they fail to account for the diachronic development of Algren's literary radicalism. An important exception here is the critical output of Ian Peddie. Although Peddie doesn't examine Algren's specifically Marxist investment in the conceptual category of the lumpenproletariat, he has more than any other critic proposed multiple productive ways of reading *for* the political in Algren without detriment.

Perhaps most surprisingly, scholarship on Depression-era American proletarian literature has been ambivalent about Algren because his work does not fit easily into standard schema for defining the forms and politics of proletarian literature. The two

standard surveys of proletarian literature, Walter Rideout's *The Radical Novel in the United States* (1956) and Barbara Foley's *Radical Representations* (1993), both assign *Somebody in Boots* to a subgenre of "bottom dogs" fiction (named after Edward Dahlberg's debut novel) that is ambiguously related to proletarian fiction. For Rideout, such novels make their revolutionary message "implicit only" (185). For Foley, such texts may be anti-capitalist but they do not "centrally depict the development of a revolutionary working-class identity" (287).

The challenge critics like Rideout and Foley have had in parsing the relationship between Algren's work, proletarian fiction, and leftist politics reminds us that Algren's novels deal not with workers but with the lumpenproletariat. Lawrence Lipton pointed this out to critique Fiedler's moniker for Algren: "But, if Algren's characters are not workers, how can it be said that he is 'the Last of the Proletarian Writers'? Unless Fiedler would class them with the *Lumpenproletariat*, in which case he is, alas, once more guilty by association—word association, which is the worst kind—for the communists have always held the view that the *Lumpenproletariat* are not workers" (5). As the history of critical discussion of Algren demonstrates, the precise dimensions of Algren's political-literary project have seemed by turns incomprehensible, invisible, or ambiguous to readers on both sides of the class struggle. Algren's unreadability seems to be centrally connected to his focus on the lumpenproletariat, suggesting that, with Algren, we need to set aside the standard terms and "faces" of Marxism and literary radicalism in America in order to grasp the ragged, nebulous parameters of what I'll refer to as Algren's lumpenproletarian Marxism.

In this dissertation, I advance a reading of Algren's literary trajectory that draws on, dialogues with, and advances the gains of Algren scholarship. Much of this scholarship emerges from a critical problematic structured around two questions: is Algren's work best understood as "naturalist" (usually employed by the critic to mean sociopolitical, determinist, didactic, and aesthetically inferior) or "modernist" (usually intended to signify existentialist, psychologically suggestive, and formally inventive)? Secondly, is Algren's sociopolitical outlook best approached as Marxian (which usually means simply "proletarian" or "Communist"), humanist, sentimentalist, or does his work have no coherent orientation? Broadly speaking, criticism of Algren has focused on the

*literary* and the *sociopolitical* features of his work, and the relation between these features. I address his work precisely in terms of that relation. I argue that the former is the practical site of the cognitive gains of the latter. The literary quality (whether in the neutral or evaluative sense) of his fiction exists neither as a result of, nor in spite of, its sociopolitical orientation. It's not that Algren resisted the lures of bourgeois literary mystification in order to insist on the documentary depiction of injustice, nor is it the case that he achieved literary proficiency and artistic merit as a consequence of rejecting an overriding concern with injustice. Rather, he negotiated and adjusted this set of literary and political relations as the demands of being a Marxist writer shifted with developments in American society. Algren is a *political* writer in the materialist sense of the term, insofar as he labors with literary means in order to produce critical knowledge. Algren's work must be understood as an ongoing, always-becoming *work* through literary figuration and literary form toward epistemological and revolutionary ends.

### **Figuring Lumpenproletarian Marxism: Althusser, Burke, and the Free Autonomy of Theoretical Production**

Lenin's remark quoted earlier comes from "*Left Wing*" *Communism—an Infantile Disorder* (1920), one of his most important works of political theory. In this text, Lenin argues that revolutionaries must acknowledge the concrete social, political, and cultural conditions of the nations in which they are working. They must engage in "the application of the *fundamental* principles of communism (Soviet power and the dictatorship of the proletariat), which will *correctly modify* these principles in certain *particulars*, correctly adapt and apply them to national and national-state distinctions." In order to be effective, revolutionary strategy must be continually adjusted: "Since the proletarian Revolution in Russia . . . the entire world has become different, and the bourgeoisie everywhere has become different too." The problem with both right-wing and left-wing forms of Communist doctrinarism is that they fetishize certain modes of agitation and organization. According to Lenin, in their efforts to educate the masses and prepare opportunities for revolution, revolutionaries must not shy away from mastering *all* available forms of political struggle, including parliamentarism and other legal modes

of resistance: “revolutionaries who are incapable of combining illegal forms of struggle with *every* form of legal struggle are poor revolutionaries indeed” (608, 614, 612).

Lenin’s text opens revolutionary politics to all available forms of organization, coalitionism, and propaganda. As he wrote elsewhere, revolutionaries must have “sound stomachs” and be “rock-hard Marxists,” able to “digest . . . inconsistent elements” (“The Party Organisation” 151). In “*Left Wing*” *Communism*, Lenin limits his discussion to political struggle but describes the correct approach to that struggle in terms of form and content—in other words, in terms with literary significance. Taken in this light, he implies a meeting of literary and political modes of strategic experimentalism: “our work today has such a durable and powerful content (for Soviet power and the dictatorship of the proletariat),” Lenin insists, “that it can *and must* manifest itself in any form” (617).<sup>4</sup>

Leninism entails an epistemology-to-politics sequence. The Leninist seeks to understand how the complex structural relations of a given social formation work in order to tailor revolutionary strategy to the peculiar needs and opportunities of that formation. To put it reductively, the bad Marxist seeks political answers in the canon of Marxist texts, reading a given sociohistorical moment as one expression of an ahistorical essence of capital. The Leninist does the work of first figuring out the precise interrelations of power and determination that compose a particular conjuncture in order to then figure out ways of transforming them. The *materialist* practice of Marxism is precisely this contingent, innovative, self-corrective mode of theory and politics. Extending the form/content logic of Lenin’s metaphor, I suggest that Lenin’s materialism applies with equal relevance to the revolutionary *writer*. That is, such self-reflective “formal” practice is essential to a writer who hopes to be adequate, in his or her writing, to the task of analyzing the social with the end of finding and figuring eventual political options.

Lenin’s political thought is a major influence on Louis Althusser’s formulation—in his canonical works of the 1960s, *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*—of the political function of theoretical practice. Simply put, Althusser positions Leninism as the heart or essence of Marxism. In 1917, Althusser argues, Lenin “was acting on the concrete of the Russian situation, of the Russian conjuncture, on what he gave the remarkable name, ‘the current situation,’ the situation whose currency defined his political practice as such.” The “analysis of the structure of a conjuncture” is fundamentally “irreplaceable” in

Lenin's thought (*For Marx* 178-9). The materiality of the conjuncture in its given form dictates the protocols of the production of scientific Marxist theory just as, Althusser argues, it dictated to Lenin the protocols of contingent political action. Althusserian social analysis is designed to conceptualize the simultaneous complexity and concrete *givenness* of the conjuncture. "Marxism establishes in principle the recognition of the givenness of the complex structure of any concrete 'object'" (*For Marx* 198). The social (like any object of investigation), for Althusser, *is what it (complexly) is*. The recognition of this given complexity, to be approached without recourse to idealisms or dogmas or scholastic sources of authority, constitutes the materialism of Marxist theory.

Althusser accounts for the social in this manner to discount any idealist, empiricist, or historicist methods as ideological and epistemologically inadequate. The social cannot be approached by any method seeking knowledge of it through questions of its origins (whether those origins are metaphysical or historical), and its very complexity makes it unavailable to sensory subjective experience. If a search for origins reduces the given heterogeneity of the social to a single determinant, reliance on sensory experience fails to grasp within itself the full scope and real functions of social processes. As Gregory Elliot explains, "[t]he fact that the ontological structure of social reality took this form rendered it opaque and theory . . . necessary." Hence, Althusserianism "emphasised both the normality and the importance for the sciences—including historical materialism—of continual development; openness to rectification and the incessant production of new knowledge became criteria of scientificity" (91). What distinguishes scientific from ideological theoretical practice, for Althusser, is the former's ability to produce new knowledge that makes a complete break from the "common sense" of ideology which, in its turn, works to confirm and reproduce the (repressive) structures of the social by mirroring or reflecting them as they appear to be. Ideology effects the misrepresentation of the (actually) opaque as the (misleadingly) obvious and thus reproduces as necessarily "obvious" the structures of class rule. "[I]deological knowledge" is "a phenomenon of *recognition*" (Althusser and Balibar 52) that establishes the alleged necessity of the current arrangements of social domination. In Alex Callinicos's words, ideology is the "problematic of guarantees" (59).

It then follows as one of Althusser's most notorious postulates that ideology is contiguous with, in fact effectively identical to, lived experience. The complexity of the social means that no empirical experience of it can properly understand it. "It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology," Althusser writes, "that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are 'obviousnesses') obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot *fail to recognize* and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out (aloud or in the 'still, small voice of conscience'): 'That's obvious! That's right! That's true!'" In fact, we never *literally* have this reaction: our ability to have lived experience, to engage in all social practices, presupposes it. This claim is all that is intended by his much-discussed scenario of ideological interpellation, dramatized as a police officer yelling "Hey, you there!" to which each subject responds *as if* "it was *really* him who was hailed" ("Ideology" 116, 118). This misrepresentation of the opacity of the social to our experience as necessary or obvious constitutes the possibility of social experience, interactions, intercourse, etc.<sup>5</sup> The totality of the social can only be known to theoretical practice that seeks to produce *new* conceptual knowledge about it, and the point of that new knowledge is political transformation.

Despite the oft-cited remark of Althusser that, in his 1960s work, he was not a structuralist but a Spinozist (qtd. in Elliott 99), it would be just as accurate to say, borrowing from the title of Gregory Elliott's study, that Althusser took a *detour* through Spinoza to return not to Marx, but to Lenin. Several concepts of Althusserian epistemology are derived from Spinoza, most crucially the opacity of lived experience as the source of epistemological falsehood, and the autonomy of theoretical knowledge from any correspondence to or reflection of the concrete real (Althusser and Balibar 40, Sprinker 204-7, Elliott 76-9). The rejection of empiricism, and the privileging of the theoretical as the site of the production of new knowledge—as Elliott puts it, as an "enclave of freedom in a world of ideological servitude" (165)—have their roots in Spinozist rationalism. Yet for Althusser, their importation into Marxism is designed to furnish Marxism with theory adequate to the demands of Leninist revolutionary politics. Althusserianism is not "theoreticist," explains Terry Eagleton, because for Althusser "theory exists primarily for the sake of political practice" (139).

As I outlined in the Introduction, the protocol of Algren's (and Ellison's) writing is the work of *figuring* the lumpenproletariat. Appropriately, like any rhetorical trope, the term *figure* encompasses multiple significations, and the slide or movement across those significations suggests the practical procedures of this lumpenproletarian Marxism. First, the figure names the liminal outline of an object not yet fully cognizable by knowledge, but whose vague liminality is then necessarily the *precondition* of the production of knowledge. As we saw in the Introduction, Marx demonstrates this role of the lumpen figure in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. Secondly, I refer to the *figure* as a rhetorical innovation of language. As we saw with Steffi's ruminations in *Never Come Morning*, the figurative perambulations of Algren's fiction give rise to sociopolitical insights that could not be produced from within extra-literary social experience. Further, figurative language enacts deconstructions of discursive precepts and significances by putting static conceptual paradigms into motion: hence, we might ascribe a certain lumpenproletarian—even "criminal"—movement, one of marginal and boundary-crossing transience, to figurative language. To quote Paul de Man: "We have no way of defining, of policing, the boundaries that separate the name of one entity from the name of another; tropes are not just travelers, they tend to be smugglers and probably smugglers of stolen goods at that" ("Epistemology" 39). Finally, I suggest the verb *to figure*: to measure up, to weigh the costs, to calculate, to speculate on a chance, to assess the risks and the options, etc. Leninism can be rendered as the conjunctural figuring (out) of knowledge and political strategy. In conceptual terms, these latter two senses of the term are as equally "ragged" as the lumpenproletariat in that they are open-ended, or to be more figurative, torn and frayed at the cuffs and the hems, at their points of closure. The combination of these three senses of "figure," taken together in their triadic interrelations, constitutes the literary practice of Algren and Ellison's lumpenproletarian Marxism.

Algren's 1930s work is just one instance of the way anticipations of the epistemological/political relation later theorized by Althusser were in fact circulating in Depression America. To demonstrate this circulation, I take a brief detour through American rhetorical theorist and philosopher Kenneth Burke. At the first American Writer's Congress in 1935, organized by the Communist-affiliated League of American

Writers (of which Algren was a member), Burke read a paper entitled “Revolutionary Symbolism in America.”<sup>6</sup> In effect, Burke theorized the possibilities opened up for Communist propaganda by the peculiar capacity of rhetorical figures. In an argument that reads like an echo of Lenin’s “*Left-Wing Communism*,” Burke proposed that the symbol of Communist discourse—the worker—was ill-suited to the strategic needs of propaganda in America, inadequate as “a device for spreading the areas of allegiance.” The appeal of this symbol beyond the ranks of the working class, he argued, was limited, as no one in America *aspired* to be a worker. Not only was the “strenuousness” of industrial labor undesirable, but Americans had been conditioned by Hollywood mass culture to desire leisurely, commodity-filled lifestyles. Burke recommended, therefore, substituting the symbol of “the people” in place of “the worker.” This would be a coding of revolutionary politics in middle-class values, and, importantly, would have “the tactical advantage” of enfolded the natural “psychological tendency” toward “unity” into revolutionary politics. “The people,” as a symbol, “contains the *ideal*, the ultimate *classless* feature which the revolution would bring about—and for this reason seems richer as a symbol of allegiance” (“Revolutionary Symbolism” 269-70). His Communist auditors were quick to object. They pointed out that not only was “the people” a traditional rhetorical weapon of the bourgeoisie, designed to convince the public that the demands of militant workers were hostile to the public good or to occlude the very reality of class difference, but that it was also the organizing trope of fascist discourse (“Revolutionary Symbolism” 276-8). In his defense, Burke insisted that the figure of “the people” could be used with *strategic* effectiveness, both to combat bourgeois hegemony and to recruit non-workers to the revolutionary cause.

Burke’s proposal rests on an assumption about the autonomy of non-literal language from the real. It implies that certain opportunities, certain freedoms, for political conceptualization and strategy are available within figurative language precisely due to its distance from the real. One could not—unless one was a fascist—organize a real political movement around “the people,” but one could use the rhetorical trope of “the people” to spur the organization of a revolutionary movement. Thus, the conceptual origins of *new* political options could be approached through literary practice. Later, in a depoliticized essay decades removed from the specific conjuncture of the 1930s, Burke

would again take up this issue. In “A Dramatistic View of the Origins of Language,” Burke considers the concept of negativity in order to argue for the autonomy of the conceptual. Drawing on Henri Bergson and adding numerous lines of speculation of his own, Burke argued that negativity as such can be *thought*, but that it is never present to be empirically experienced: what we might misperceive, in experience, as a negative condition is simply an unexpected or unintended positivity. Burke uses the example of reading a thermometer: “if you wanted a thermometer to show 32, then any and every other reading could be classed as ‘not 32,’ though each such reading would be exactly what it positively was.” Similarly, while it is possible to describe numerous experiences as involving negation—“we can comfortably say that a man walks down the street by motions whereby one foot ‘negates’ the other”—we never experience this negation as such (420-1). The negative is “a peculiarly linguistic resource” and reason can be defined as “the ability to use the negative *qua* negative” (419, 431). This meditation on the negative brings Burke to an Althusserian/Spinozan understanding of the relationship of thought and experience: negativity demonstrates “that there is a qualitative distinction between the sensory . . . and the rational” (429). Hence, Burke notes that, for Spinoza, “[t]he negative is in the realm of *idea*. And its ‘rational’ nature is implicit in Spinoza’s stress upon the ‘adequate idea’ as the means to freedom of action” (430). Burke had suggested as much in 1935: the *freedom* of political *action* to transform an empirical reality that appears obvious in its inevitability originates in *theoretical* practice.

If we *experience* positivity and can use negativity *in thought* in order to recognize and think beyond the limits of positivity, then the practice of imagination, for Burke, falls between these poles. Unable to bring negativity into positive being—to re-present it—representations and images can only gesture toward negativity as something that haunts or inhabits the margins of what is positively presented. Burke cites the commandment “Thou shalt not kill”: this imperative is “in essence an idea” but “in its role as imagery it can but strike the resonant gong: ‘Kill!’” The prohibition, when imagined, invokes the specter of its transgression (431). Consider the carefully-chosen title of Edward Newhouse’s Depression novel *You Can’t Sleep Here* (1934): this prohibition, uttered to the unemployed protagonist by security guards and librarians, as an image, makes visible the positive experience of sleeping (and all the forms of domestic personal comfort that

are metonymically related to sleep) under the ban of the admonitory negative. The titular prohibition is appropriated by Newhouse *for* a sociopolitical position: the human right *to* sleep, to be socially stable, that the economic deprivations of capitalism have cancelled. He does this by having the protagonist, an out-of-work journalist, become politically active with the Communists and organize a Hooverville in New York against the threat of eviction. Newhouse's figurative rendering of the revolution is a microcosmic political action in defense of the positive right *to sleep* here. The prohibitory negative generates the *imagination* of a revolution in the name of the prohibited positive: Newhouse renders, in rhetoric, the orthodox Marxist precept that capitalism furnishes its own gravediggers.

Negativity, as Burke explains, thus consists of “changes of intensity,” as non-representable modifications of the positivity of experience: “negativistic motives” tend to “[crowd] in” on positive experiences, and the negative can be found “lurking in a quasi-positive” (434-5). The negative also makes possible the figurative use of language. That is, we can construct figures only because of an innate “feeling for the negative”: irony depends on an ability to distinguish the rhetoric of the statement from reality, and “[o]ne uses metaphor without madness insofar as one spontaneously knows that the *literal* implication of the figure is *not* true” (461-2). Burke's essay, although unfocused and allusive at times, offers a more philosophical justification for Burke's recommendation of “the people” as a political metaphor for American Communists: in the language of the 1930s, one uses “the people” without being a fascist insofar as one is a politically-conscious revolutionary.

Burke articulates the complex relationship between the necessity of the real concrete, the transformative potential of the theoretical, and the ability of the figurative (or literary) to potentially *work* that transformative capacity upon the concrete through non-literal, figurative mediations of the concrete. Read in this manner, Burke positions a capacity for image-making within the epistemological protocols of Spinoza and Althusser. Given the conditions of Depression America—in which negativity or lack come to determine experience and thought as well as the representational priorities of American literature—the contiguity of Burke's thinking between these two essays is significant. The terms of the peculiar epistemological methods that Althusser would

fashion into a new Marxism in the 1960s in France were already on the discursive agenda in America in the 1930s, there to be taken up by Nelson Algren.

But then how do we understand the privileged figurative place of the lumpenproletariat, specifically, in Algren's practice? Again, Althusser helps to parse this decidedly unusual location of the lumpen at the center, rather than the margins (where Marx assigned them) of Marxism. When the "late" Althusser in the 1980s turned to what he called "aleatory materialism," he used lumpenproletarian figurations to conceptualize its practice. In "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter," Althusser extends the conjunctural "figuring out" of Leninist political practice to a definition of materialism proper.<sup>7</sup> Performing symptomatic readings of philosophers such as Epicurus, Machiavelli, Spinoza, Hobbes, and Rousseau, Althusser organizes them as an "underground" tradition in Western philosophy, one that sought to grasp the facticity of the world in its pure givenness, constituted against nothing other than nothingness itself. For thinkers in this tradition, the object of analysis is defined by its aleatory nature, by it being the non-necessary product of an encounter that didn't have to take place. The conjuncture then names the facticity of the social as nothing but the combination or coming-together of overdetermined and proliferating encounters. There is nothing "beyond" or "behind" the social: literally nothing, or what Althusser calls (to distinguish it from the productive nothingness of Hegel), "the void." Recognizing the origin of the social as a chance encounter, the product of the "infinitesimal *swerve*" of *clinamen* (169), enables political practice to adequately grasp the conjuncture so as to work transformation. Marx's materialism, Althusser proposes, consisted of understanding capitalism as a product of the process of primitive accumulation, which we should understand as an aleatory encounter between "the proletariat stripped of everything but his labour-power" and the owners of excess money (196-9). But nothing in the intentions of the encountering players, nor any teleological trajectory of history, made capitalism the necessary product of this encounter. Marxist theory must then illuminate the conjuncture through a recognition of its non-necessary and non-originary ontology. Hence, it is no surprise that the aleatory materialists Althusser cites (such as Machiavelli, Spinoza, and Rousseau) tend to be thought of as political thinkers: they were seeking not the "essence of reality" so much as the "essence of *practice*," or politics, or—in Marx's

terms—class struggle. Aleatory materialism is a practice tied to no origin or end other than its (transforming) self. “To the old question ‘What is the origin of the world?’, this materialist philosopher answers: ‘Nothingness!’, ‘Nothing’, ‘I start out from nothing’” (188). The freedom of the theorist’s practice is enabled by a *voiding* of the (imaginary) constraints of necessity, a thesis in which we can see Althusser’s earlier insistence on the autonomy of theory from the real concrete of experience.

To imagine aleatory materialism, Althusser made figurative use of the experiences of those Marxism dubs the lumpenproletariat. Aleatory materialism is like a hobo in that it “catches a moving train” and “hoists itself aboard” (“Underground” 189). With no intention of arriving anywhere in particular, the materialist “gets off somewhere along the way, in a four-horse town with a ridiculous railway station in the middle of it” and heads for the “[s]aloon, beer, whisky.” Althusser probably never read many American novels of life on the bum, since he seems to think that the people who hop trains are cowboys, the heroes of “American Westerns” (“Portrait” 290). Antonio Negri, a major proponent of Althusser’s aleatory phase, also makes this error, describing aleatory materialists as “American heroes of the Old West who jump on a moving train.” Yet he adds that they are also “new IWW agitators, who take the revolution where the train of being leads them” (66). Perhaps as a sign of the traditional exteriority of the lumpenproletariat to Marxist theoretical tradition, neither Althusser nor Negri realizes the proximity of his metaphorical vehicle to the lumpenproletariat, whose material deprivation offers possibilities for a figurative freedom. As the hobo narrator of William Attaway’s 1939 novel *Let Me Breathe Thunder* remarks at the opening, “we always had more time on our hands than anything else, and distance doesn’t mean a thing to a guy on the road” (4).

Algren’s lumpen hoboes similarly circulate freely, often without destination or intention, across Depression-ravaged America. In the postwar fiction, such as *The Man with the Golden Arm*, they no longer hop trains but are equally outside the legitimate social institutions of Cold War society. Algren doubted their ability to actually be, due to that exteriority, “new IWW agitators” spreading the revolution. However, this doubt did not prevent him from *figuring* their experiences of marginality, transience, and exteriority in an attempt to produce politically-useful knowledge of capitalist society. The

deprivation that constituted the phenomenological reality of the lumpenproletariat became the raw material that Algren would work over, employing what Burke described as the “peculiarly linguistic resource of the negative.” Coming into his career amidst the severe material lack of the Great Depression, and knowing that deprivation first hand from his own experiences on the bum, his literary project became an attempt to figure (from) that lack, to take advantage of the opportunities the peculiarly out-of-place, excessive, home-less *void* of the lumpen offered to literary practice. That his figuration from and upon that void would shift from limitation to possibility—from a means of analyzing the cognitive limits of experience, to a figurative production of political possibility—demonstrates how Algren went from riding the rails in experience to riding the rails—like Althusser’s figurative hobo—in literary practice.

### **Fighting for Nothing: The Lumpenproletariat and the Negative in Depression-era Literature**

Nelson Algren graduated from the University of Illinois with a degree in journalism in June, 1931, in the midst of what historian Robert McElvaine calls the country’s “worst crisis since the Civil War” (75). It was an inauspicious time to start a career of any sort, as unemployment and resulting material scarcity were unprecedented. As David M. Kennedy has argued, it was not just that unemployment rates hit record highs in the 1930s, but that the very perception of the problem of unemployment shifted. By 1931, “[u]nemployment now loomed not as a transient difficulty but as a deep, intractable problem that showed no sign of abating,” and Americans came to believe that “the nation had turned a historical corner, to find itself facing an endless future of pervasive, structural unemployment.” Ten million people were unemployed by 1932: in Chicago and Detroit, industrial production was especially hard hit, and these cities had unemployment rates around fifty percent (Kennedy 87, Watkins 44-45). Unemployment relief was generally a municipal or private concern, and the country had no form of response to unemployment on the national level and in these numbers. But the measuring of unemployment itself was still a relatively new concern, originated only by census takers in 1930. By 1931, Kennedy explains, “lawmakers were still guessing, on the basis of anecdotes, impressions, and fragmentary reports, at the numbers of the unemployed”

(57). Harry Hopkins, a major New Deal relief director, complained that even by 1936 “the absence of really adequate unemployment figures” continued to impede relief efforts (qtd. in Patterson 41). As a cataclysmic crisis that defied traditional epistemological modes and challenged ideological narratives of American identity, Depression-era unemployment defined the moment of the 1930s as one of material scarcity and deprivation *alongside* the potential for new sociopolitical options.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, it was overwhelming scarcity in the face of abundance that dramatized the unequal distributive arrangements of capitalism. Robert McElvaine has argued that the maldistribution of income across social classes was the primary cause of the Depression: “[i]t led to both underconsumption and oversaving, and it helped fuel stock speculation.” In 1935-36, the top fifth of Americans earned 51.7% of income, the lowest fifth earned just 4.1% (McElvaine 49-50, 331). As a result of maldistribution, people starved in the midst of plenty. The scarcity of the Depression is best understood politically, then, in terms of *deprivation*. As the decade’s radicals would insist, the traumas of the Depression were material and not mystical in origin, located in an inequitable social structure that could be transformed. The bankruptcy of capitalism was starkly visible in the 1930s as a system whose logic produced results like the paradox described by David Kennedy: “in New York City school officials reported some twenty thousand malnourished children in 1932, while apples fell to the ground in Oregon orchards for want of buyers” (86). A character in Attaway’s *Let Me Breathe Thunder* remarks that “an apple sure is a beautiful thing. Makes a man think about guns and revolutions when he sees them rotting on the ground” (86). And indeed, hunger riots became relatively common in the early 1930s, as the destitute used force to seize food (McElvaine 92).

The figurative role of deprivation in sociopolitical consciousness-raising can be seen in some of the decade’s more compelling literary responses to scarcity, including Algren’s. How scarcity could be figuratively worked as a ground for political organization is demonstrated by the protagonist of Edward Newhouse’s *You Can’t Sleep Here*. Gene’s unemployed friend Connie is suspicious of the motives that drive Chuck, another member of their Hooverville, to Communist Party work. Gene asks Connie what he would do if “a chimney hat” from a luxury hotel kicked a ham sandwich out of the

hands of Tod, a nine-year old newsboy they know. Connie responds: “Knock his teeth out and hammer them into his skull.” “That’s what Chuck is doing” in his Party work, Gene explains (145). Presenting hunger as the result of historically specific and socially-rooted acts of deprivation is the work of Communist political analysis and the first step toward galvanizing the actional capacities of the deprived.

Tom Kromer’s *Waiting for Nothing* (1935) approaches the problem of political action in the deprived 1930s through sustained figurative labor upon the category of the negative. Kromer came from a working-class West Virginia family, hitting the road as a hobo in 1929 when he ran out of money to finance his college education at Marshall College. In 1933, he landed in the Civilian Conservation Corps in California and began to write.<sup>9</sup> *Waiting for Nothing*, an autobiographical account of his days as a hobo (the protagonist shares Kromer’s name), was published two years later. The title foregrounds the persistence of the negative throughout the narrative’s prose. Kromer employs what Burke understood as the negative’s linguistic capacities to render various experiences of Depression-era deprivation anew, to infuse in them the possibility of political alternatives. At one mission, the bums “lean up against the sides and sprawl on the curb. They are waiting for nothing” (123). A homeless woman who abandons her baby on a park bench shocks Kromer’s writer friend Karl, but that’s because “Karl is soft-hearted. That is nothing. I have seen worse than that. I know that that is nothing” (75). At one point, Kromer tries to rob a bank but has a failure of nerve. Later he reflects that even though he had a gun, “What did I do with it? . . . Nothing” (109). Bums sitting around a hobo jungle “do not ask questions about each other. There is nothing to ask” (115). Late in the novel, some bums being raided by bulls (toughs employed to keep hoboes off trains) in a hobo jungle spontaneously start to resist but don’t get far in their unarmed state: “What can we do when they have us covered with these gats? There is nothing we can do” (118). Through accumulated iteration, this nothingness assumes a nebulous presence, and it becomes possible to figure these experiences of lack as gesturing, out of that lack, toward a future surfeit.

Kromer’s lumpenproletarian protagonist never makes this mental gesture himself. But Kromer the author’s employment of the negative in language adds what Burke calls a “change of intensity” to his imagination of scarcity. For example, at one point, Tom

encounters a prostitute named Yvonne. Her room is described as “clean.” “It has a bed and a chair. A hot plate sits on a box. . . . I notice that the bed is a double bed. That is thoughtful of the landlady because if the beds were not double beds, there would be no use for the hot plate. There would be nothing to eat” (83). The intended message is straightforward: the landlady’s generosity in providing a double bed allows Yvonne to practice her trade, which in turn allows Yvonne to eat. Such are the experiential limits of lumpenproletarian life. Yet the negative syntactical structures of Kromer’s deceptively-simple prose gesture toward a political possibility: if the trade of prostitution (a consequence, for Yvonne, of Depression deprivation) no longer existed, there would no longer be the need for hot plates, the rudimentary cooking tool of the poor that here stands in for poverty itself. Instead, there would be “nothing.” The word comes to signify as a chance, an opportunity, the potential for different and better social arrangements *beyond* those necessitated by deprivation. Kromer’s language in this way troubles the necessity and closure of the present.

Kromer foregrounds this figurative practice of the negative in an early scene. Arrested on a vagrancy charge, his protagonist formulates the text of a speech he hopes to give in court, explaining how “crime or beggary” is the consequences of “a world-wide crisis in unemployment” (29). But when it comes time to speak, the judge cuts him off. His political analysis vanishes into experiential nothingness but at the same time moves to the written page. This is the figurative procedure of the text: to translate lack, deprivation, and material negativity into political *possibility* within writing. Taking the material limitations of the lumpenproletariat—their *rags*—Kromer articulates a figurative practice that will re-inscribe those limitations as political possibility, recasting that negativity on *paper* as new political knowledge. Kromer’s other motif of this recasting is the figure of “guts,” a term that slides in signification between hunger (deprivation/negativity) and political agency. At one point, exasperated by deprivation, the protagonist reflects: “If a guy had any guts, he wouldn’t put up with this” (98). He knows the real physical obstacle hunger poses to revolution: “You can stop a revolution of stiff’s with a sack of toppin’s. . . . When a stiff’s gut is empty, he hasn’t got the guts to start anything. When his gut is full, he just doesn’t see any use in raising hell” (72). The play of signifiers allows Kromer the author to transcend the experiential limits of his

lumpenproletarian avatar by introducing the suggestion that deprivation can be *a source of* as well as a restriction on agency, that there is a potential relationship between having guts and having an empty gut, and that the only “use in raising hell” is to reach a historical point where the class conflict has been resolved, and everyone’s “gut is full.”<sup>10</sup>

*Waiting for Nothing* suggests the rich figurative opportunities and options furnished to Depression radical writers by the experiential contours of the most deprived social group, the lumpenproletariat. The marginality of this group—their fringe relationship to Communist proletarianism, economic theory, and the epistemological capacities of the American state—makes them amenable to figuration that, ultimately, aims to effect revolutionary transformation of all that is. “We ain’t even people,” one of the hoboes of *Let Me Breathe Thunder* says at the end of the novel: “We ain’t nothing” (245). As barely discernable figures, they are eminently open to productive figurations.

The 1930s work of Nelson Algren takes its place alongside the figurative projects of writers like Kromer, but differs in critical ways. Kromer takes a romantic approach to the Depression lumpen, using their material limitations to generate, in language, a revolutionary negative that exists beyond the actual consciousness of the lumpenproletariat. For Kromer, lumpenproletarian lack or negativity symbolizes the revolutionary negation promised by anti-capitalist politics. Algren is more firmly located inside the Marxist problematic of suspicion toward the lumpenproletariat and its political potential in the class struggle. For Algren in the 1930s, lumpenproletarian lack is an absolute negativity, and his figurations of that lack provide an immanent dramatization of the origin, nature, and consequences of the lumpenproletariat’s limitation and political ignorance. The aesthetic of *Somebody in Boots* is crafted not in spite of but in the very terms of that ignorance. Only in the changed political circumstances of the Second World War and the postwar period would Algren adjust his literary project to realize the figurative radical potential of the lumpenproletariat’s marginality.

### **“Petty Crime is Their Only Form of Social Protest”: The Criminal Thirties**

Algren wrote his first pieces of short fiction prior to his graduation from the University of Illinois. These tales of the criminal and the down and out stemmed from his time as a reporter for the *Daily Illini*: Algren covered the local judicial scene, necessarily

delving into the details of crime and punishment. Before turning to journalism, he had flirted with sociology, taking courses in criminology (Drew 26-31). Fascinated by the poor and the criminal and the slippery distinction between them, Algren had not yet himself been one of them. He grew up in Chicago, where his father was an auto mechanic who worked long hours but was able to provide his family with financial stability (he eventually opened his own repair shop). His mother came from a middle-class assimilated German-Jewish family. Algren's sister's husband, a well-off engineer, helped finance Algren's college education (Drew 12-24). By no means elite or privileged, the future novelist of the poor, the transient, and the criminal came from a relatively stable class background. Only in 1931, in the depths of the Great Depression, would he come to understand his own social role as a writer in terms of an identity with the lumpen bottom dogs of society.

Unable to find employment when he graduated, Algren took to the road, joining what he later called "the tens of thousands of Americans literally milling around at that time trying to survive" (Donohue 55). From 1931 to 1933 he rode the rails trying to survive as well, mostly hoboeing through the South and Southwest United States. These years would provide material for the rest of his writing career. By 1933, he was back in Chicago, where he eventually joined the local Communist Party-backed John Reed Club. Designed to foster young talent in proletarian literature, the club served to introduce Algren to the Communist left of the Depression. James T. Farrell, Jack Conroy, and Richard Wright—all already-prominent or emergent left-wing writers of the period—were the most important of these contacts (Drew 32-53).<sup>11</sup> Algren served on the editorial staff of *Left Front*, the journal of the club. For the rest of the 1930s (and well into the following years), Algren would be active with the Communist movement and loyal to the Communist position.<sup>12</sup> After publishing some short fiction on hobo life, Algren received an offer from Vanguard Press to write a novel. The press gave him one hundred dollars to return to the Southwest and work the setting into a novel, and to gather more first-hand accounts of hobo life. In autumn of 1933, he made his way to Alpine, Texas. There, he used a typewriter on the campus of a local teacher's college to start composing the novel that would become *Somebody in Boots* (Drew 59-65).

In January, Algren decided to return to Chicago, but he had “started becoming attached to the typewriters” (Donohue 37). Lacking his own typewriter in Chicago, his departure would pose a considerable obstacle to completing the novel. So he stole his favorite machine and attempted to ship it north. He was caught and jailed in Alpine until the meeting of the circuit court (Drew 65-67). Almost thirty years later, Algren claimed to have spent “five, four months, I guess, four months and some days” in jail (Donohue 39), but Bettina Drew points out that he was actually there for three and a half weeks. Drew persuasively suggests that Algren exaggerated the time served because “the experience so stirred his imagination and assumed such proportions in his mind that he probably felt he had been there longer” (74). This episode is the only time Algren spent behind bars—yet prison and jail scenes occur in most of his published works. Something about the experience not only stirred his imagination but in fact helped mold his protocols for the writing of lumpenproletarian experience itself. Most immediately, his time in jail provided content for *Somebody in Boots*: the brutality of the prisoners, and the various hierarchies among them that are coded in racial supremacy and reinforced by violence, all reappear in this and later work. Yet the circumstances of Algren’s imprisonment—the specifics of his criminal act—were fundamental in shaping the practice by which he would write. In his notebook, Algren wrote while in jail: “Lumpenproletariat, me / trespassed private property / wondering how it always comes / there’s just no rest for such poor bums” (qtd. in Drew 67).

In his police statement, Algren declared that he “wanted a typewriter very bad because I am a writer by profession, I’ve never owned a typewriter of my own, I was eager to finish a manuscript.” Further, “a typewriter is the only means I had to complete a book which means either a few dollars or utter destitution. There is nothing more vital to my existence than a typewriter, it is the only means I have to earn a living.” He concludes his description of the theft by admitting “I didn’t have the feeling that I was stealing from an individual, I felt like I was taking it from the school” (Drew 68). His court-appointed attorney took up this line of defense at his trial, arguing that as an artisan Algren had the right to access the tools of his trade: “In these troubled times of economic depression this man was stealing for the same reason that Jean Valjean stole a loaf of bread, to survive” (qtd. in Drew 73). This comparison positions Algren the writer and Valjean the lumpen

literary character in a relation of equivalence: Algren's firsthand experience of lumpen criminality is intimately linked with his capacity to write. Algren was found guilty, but the judge downgraded a potential prison sentence to a mandate to leave the state. Algren did and returned to Chicago to write his first novel.

Algren had shifted with the unemployed for years, but this experience was something new. The inauguration of his career made necessary an act of theft: as a writer, he quite literally was compelled into the criminal ranks of the lumpenproletariat. This meant marginalization from all the inclusive structures and institutions of society ("there's just no rest for such poor bums"). To be poor and unemployed is one thing: many of the Depression-era fictions of unemployment (such as *You Can't Sleep Here*, Edward Anderson's *Hungry Men*, or Tom Kromer's short story "Hungry Men") feature characters who have lost their steady, gainful employment as a result of the Depression. But to be compelled to resort to criminal means of survival is to be doubly marginalized, to be more than simply an ex-proletarian. Despite all the inconsistency of Marx's use of the term lumpenproletariat, we should recall that he tended to distinguish it from the ex-proletariat: in *Capital*, Marx separated the "actual lumpenproletariat"—"vagabonds, criminals, prostitutes"—from the unemployed yet able to work, orphans and impoverished children, and those who were no longer able to work due to technical shifts in the means of production or industrial accidents (797). The lumpenproletariat, Marx implies, are defined by utter exteriority to production: not simply currently unemployed, they never work.

But this distinction of Marx's neglects the fact that criminality is more often than not a material *consequence* of falling outside of the labor-capital dialectic. The unemployed are *always* potentially criminals, always likely to move, out of necessity, from the ranks of the merely unemployed to those of the criminal element. To be unemployed, then, is not only to be currently lacking a job: it is to be precariously on the verge of greater social and discursive non-being. By linking his own non-class status ("Lumpenproletariat / me") to his incarceration, Algren grasped how this descent from the ranks of the unemployed segment of the proletariat made total his—and his cellmates'—exteriority to institutions and discourses both hegemonic and revolutionary. The contours of his authorial career thus emerge from an awareness of the absolute

negativity of the lumpen: structurally distinguished from all classes in the class struggle and utterly marginal to the reproduction of the social, the world of lumpen figures is the *void* against which and out of which Algren's figurative work proceeds.

If the lumpen are always potentially criminals, that precariousness derives from the *real* crimes of capitalist inequity and exploitation. "Petty crime is their only form of social protest," wrote Lawrence Lipton of Algren's lumpen characters (10). In the Depression, the language of criminality and victimhood was a site of sociopolitical struggle. When criminal attorney Clarence Darrow argued that Roosevelt's National Recovery Administration victimized the "little fellow," the small businessman, through price and wage controls, director Hugh S. Johnson retorted: "Who is the real Little Fellow . . . the black man in the swamp – the child in the factory – the women in the sweat shop – or is it the small enterprise that says it cannot exist in competition unless it practices those barbarisms?" (qtd. in Kennedy 186). Floyd Olson, the Farmer-Labor governor of Minnesota, in 1934 declared himself a "radical" (in contrast to the liberalism of the New Deal) because he wanted "a definite change in the system" rather than reformist "tinkering" and "patching": "I am not satisfied with hanging a laurel wreath upon burglars and thieves and pirates and calling them code authorities or something else" (qtd. in McElvaine 232). Criminality was one available rhetoric of anti-capitalism in the period.

In stealing the typewriter, Algren enacted a reversal similar to Olson's of the poles of victim and criminal. His theft was a project against capital's thieving expropriation of the means of survival from the masses. In this way, Algren's concrete biographical experience, set within the contexts of the 1930s, accounts for the particularities of his career-long engagement with lumpenproletarian figures, figures whose status as the *victims* of social inequity required the radical writer to identify with their marginal position. "If you feel you belong to things as they are," Algren would later write, describing both the desperate criminal and the committed writer, "you won't hold up anybody in the alley no matter how hungry you may get" (*Nonconformity* 34).<sup>13</sup> A criminality that stemmed from the reality of social marginalization was the starting point for Algren's commitment, as a writer, to the production of political knowledge and anti-capitalist critique. Grasping the historical significations attendant on criminality is how

we must approach crime and punishment in the fiction of a writer who was generally—except for once in 1934—a law-abiding citizen.

In the 1960s, Algren would provide another turn of the screw to his theory of the criminal nature of writing. Explaining to H.E.F. Donohue how Hollywood director Otto Preminger cheated him of the rights to the film version of *The Man with the Golden Arm*, Algren said that he was “as innocent as possible on his [Preminger’s] territory—in his field. . . . I mean we weren’t talking about literature, we weren’t talking about human values; we were talking about how you go about borrowing money from a bank and getting somebody to write the script. . . . I was totally innocent of all this.” Here innocence seems to refer to his own naiveté, or lack of experience and pragmatism, in dealing with Preminger. Yet he then goes on to explain that by innocence he actually refers to a cognitive capacity that is produced *out of* experience. This explanation seems designed, in a somewhat vague manner, to indicate his superiority over Preminger, to suggest that Algren is, as an artist, “above” the commercial director. Yet Algren is also positioning “innocence” in such a way as to align it with the practice of theory, which is distinct from the “guilt” of *mere* experience or consciousness.

We’re not talking about the kind of innocence you have from not coming into contact with the world. . . . I’m talking about the innocence that comes *through* contact. Innocence is not just the *lack* of something. Innocence is an achieved thing. You can’t be unworldly without first being worldly. I mean anybody can be unworldly, I mean just duck the world. But to be an innocent in the best sense is to have the kind of *unworldliness* that comes out of worldliness, to be able to see that the worldly thing is just make-believe, to be able to dispense with the ordinary compulsions that people have. (Donohue 131, 132)

The experiential criminality/marginality of the lumpen—their “guilt” so to speak—would furnish Algren with the raw materials for the production of Marxist theory through literary practice. Algren grasped this practice as “innocent” of “worldly” experience, that is, as cognitively superior to the “guilt” of *ideology* which, somewhat like Preminger’s materialistic business acumen, serves, in Althusser’s terms, only a “practico-social function” (i.e., the reproduction of current structures of class domination) (*For Marx* 231). By using “innocence” to conceptualize truth, Algren undoes the conventional association of truth with experience, and ignorance (or naiveté) with non-experience: he deftly reverses the valences of the old innocence/experience opposition. If “worldly”

experience and consciousness lead to a reproduction of the social as what obviously “is,” the “*unworldliness*” of literary practice, for Algren, could produce new sociopolitical knowledge. The potential for that production out of the “guilty” experiences of the lumpen would be the major concern of Algren’s career.

### ***Somebody in Boots* and the Poetics of Ignorance**

The lumpen figures of *Somebody in Boots* never attain that cognitively-superior “innocence.” The dust jacket of the 1935 Vanguard Press American edition of *Somebody in Boots*, however, would have provided the 1930s reader with an unfortunately deceptive impression. A close-up of an intently-focused young man whose eyes and facial expression reflect interior sources of angst or conflict almost entirely obscures the railroad yard in the background. But the lumpen protagonist of the novel, Cass McKay, is in fact remarkably delimited and de-formed as a literary character *by* capitalism (here present in the synecdoche of the railroad yard): lacking the ability to reflect cognitively on his experiences, his understanding never transcends their immanence. As a result, his psychic interiority is never developed substantially enough to fully differentiate it from his experiential exteriority. The complexly interior modernist hero depicted on the Vanguard Press cover is nowhere to be found in the novel itself. Additionally, the man on the cover is an *adult*: his expression suggests he is meditating on the harsh traumas of his formative experiences. Yet Cass McKay never transcends adolescence. His lover Norah Egan at one point observes that Cass’s face was “unwashed of something adolescent. The film of puberty was still upon it” (191). In other words, Cass undergoes no process of *bildung* in the novel. His experiences do not amount to character development and maturation. He never attains anything like wisdom from his encounters and hardships among the Depression lumpen—at the end of the novel, he is not much changed from the beginning. Rather than a full-fledged character, he remains a liminal *figure*, the outline of a character.

On the other hand, the dust jacket of the 1935 Constable and Co. English edition better captures the novel’s protagonist. It depicts a figure of a man cowering beneath a giant, spiked boot about to crush him.<sup>14</sup> Despite its comic appearance, the English cover accurately depicts a novel in which a severely delimited character can only (mis)perceive

the source of his material troubles as “somebody in boots.” Just as the reader can’t tell who is wearing the giant boot on the cover, Cass can never arrive at an understanding of who or what that “somebody” is. The violence and deprivation of lumpen experience—the “boots” of the title, which recur throughout the novel as synecdochic indicators of that violence—obstruct the lumpen individual’s ability to grasp the social function of that violence, to distinguish forms of violence from each other, and to understand his or her objective place with regard to the class struggle. As such, the lumpenproletariat posed an obstacle to 1930s collective proletarian revolutionary politics.

Algren approaches this obstacle in the terms in which Marx first articulated it in *The Communist Manifesto*. Marx, in a passage that serves as the epigraph for the third section of the novel, announces the importance, to proletarian politics, of a consideration of the lumpenproletariat: “The ‘dangerous class,’ the social scum (lumpenproletariat), that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society, may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue” (qtd. in *Somebody* 155). Yet *Somebody in Boots* is not a simple call to proletarianism, or even for the mere organization of the lumpen into the ranks of the proletariat. In its attempts to figure the opacity of individual experience itself, the novel points toward Leninist conjunctural analysis (rather than simple recognition of the historical necessity of the proletarian revolution) as the focus of Marxism. In the first part of *The Communist Manifesto*, the revolutionary proletariat is organically produced out of its experiences in the capitalist labor process: laborers experience the reduction of subject difference under socialized labor and thus come to experience themselves as a body whose strength in numerousness makes evident to them their political agency. They make use of the infrastructure of capitalist industry to extend proletarian solidarity from local instances to national organization. These and other developments are necessary outcomes of capitalism’s development. “What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers,” Marx confidently writes. “Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable” (9-12, 16). Marx’s brief warning about the disruptive role of the lumpenproletariat pales in significance beside this world-historical inevitability. Algren, however, grasped the need to analyze the threat posed by the lumpen to proletarian

politics, and he saw that threat as symptomatic of the inadequacy of the teleological vision of orthodox Communism.

Algren understood the material deprivations of the 1930s as having created a materially and cognitively deprived non-class of criminals, hoboes, and prostitutes. As a writer, he attempted to understand by imaginatively inhabiting that delimited consciousness. His 1935 *New Masses* story “A Lumpen” is narrated from the first-person perspective of a hobo roaming the streets of Chicago. He picks up a book from a street distributor entitled “Are You the Wreck of a Man, Consultation Free,” hoping for a diagnosis of his situation. He reads it “hard like I had buboes [inflammations of the lymphatic glands in the groin] and wanted to know from the book where to go.” But since the book will disadvantage him in the homeless shelter he’s lodging in (“if the louser sees I am readin’ such a book he will ask have I got a hard chancre or what, that I am reading such a book”), he discards it. Algren here suggests that the peculiar material conditions of the lumpen inhibit their development of any form of understanding. This lumpen figure cannot access books—and cannot more figuratively “read” his experiences—due to the policing routines of hobo life. As such, his interiority is depleted: lying in his bed that night, he can think of nothing but “a song I learned once.” The next day, he encounters an interracial Communist Party parade. Yet he fails to understand what he sees. “Niggers was walkin’ with white men, carryin’ banners, so I stood an’ watched,” he tells us. “Them’s mighty cocky niggers,” he remarks to a bystander. He can read their signs, but he cannot *read* them, cannot parse their potential political significance for him: “‘Black and White, Unite and Fight,’ said a sign a white guy was carryin’ and I could read every letter.” The words are discernible to him, but not their significance as a rallying cry—he specifically identifies the carrier of a sign touting interracial unity as “a white guy.” He can only respond to the parade with a declaration of his utter lack: “I went up to a guy and said, ‘Mister, I ain’t got a *goddamn* thing’” but the man ignores him. The narrator ends the story as literally a “bribed tool of reactionary intrigue,” selling copies of demagogue Huey Long’s *American Progress* newspaper (25-6).

The appearance of this story in the Communist *New Masses* leaves no doubt as to where Algren’s political sympathies lie, yet his experiences among the lumpenproletariat seem to have convinced him that their inability to process their experiences—their

*ideological* sense of their social position—is the obstacle that *The Communist Manifesto* warns they pose to Communist politics. In the magazine, the story appears on the page alongside a poem by Richard Wright titled “Spread Your Sunrise!” The poem is a typical ode to the historical necessity of the proletarian revolution, addressed to a “bushy-haired giant-child” from Russia who with “a bucketful of sunrise” is “splashing crimson everywhere, / Just painting the whole world red!” Wright uncritically celebrates this figure of the revolution: “Gallop on, Big Timer, gallop on! / If anybody ask you who your Ma and Pa were / Show your birth certificate signed by Lenin: / UUUU! SSSS! SSSS! RRRR! / And tell them you’re a man-child of the Revolution.” Wright concludes by urging him to “Stride on, Big Shot, stride on / Stride and spread your sunrise, red-wash the whole world!” (26). In response to the confident and simplistic political vision of this poem—that the revolution, in the same form and content it took in Russia, will spread across the world and to America—Algren’s story literally embodies, on the printed page, the non-response of its lumpen narrator to the Communist parade. The two texts eye each other across the page just as the narrator eyes the Communist parade across the negative space of his raggedness, those socially-produced limitations that keep him distinct from, and a potential threat to, the proletariat.

Algren had earlier essayed a very similar treatment of the lumpenproletariat as a problem for Marxism in the 1933 story “An American Diary” (which never saw publication). Written concurrently with *Somebody in Boots*, the story takes the form of the diary of Elmer, an unemployed Chicagoan and devout Christian who tries to support his wife Ann and himself by selling city maps on commission for the Chicago World’s Fair. He doesn’t have much success in this venture: “Nothing today,” “None today,” “Nothing,” are his only entries for many dates. Algren lets his reader know that Elmer’s experience of the negative is produced by capitalism, that it is to be accurately comprehended as *deprivation*, but that his awareness of his experience remains ideological. When he records in one entry that “[m]ore meat is packed in Chicago than in any other city in the world,” he does so only to avow his reactionary, civic-booster patriotism. He is unaware of the cognitive insight that lies in his unintentional juxtaposition of this fact with his note, on the same day, that “Ann didn’t cook much for supper. Just beans” (4). Elmer’s writing records the epistemological emptiness of his

experience, noting sentiments and observations without grasping their non-apparent yet nonetheless objective significance. Eventually, the physical and psychological tension of scarcity become unbearable, and he attacks a garage mechanic, claiming the mechanic was “a filthy bullshivik” (5). When he is let out of jail, he claims he has been saved and reborn as God’s “tool” for smashing Communism: “To Godless Russia I shall be as a scourge in the hands of the Lord. Through me Moscow shall become one with Sodom and Gomorrah” (6). He starts preaching in public, and eventually he and Ann are raking in so much money he is obliged to end his writing: “No more time for diaries—Glory! Whoopee! Glory! Whoopee!” (8). The lumpen Elmer remains caught in the ideological “realities” of religion and nationalism.

As “A Lumpen” appeared in the *New Masses*, various handwritten notes on the typescript suggest that Algren intended “An American Diary” to be published or otherwise circulated by the Chicago John Reed Club. And just as the sociopolitical lesson of “A Lumpen” is complemented by the proletarian vision of Wright’s “Spread Your Sunrise!”, the reverse side of the second page of Algren’s typescript of “An American Diary” contains multiple handwritten lines of a poem called “Delivery,” which Algren likely wrote while in jail in Alpine. The lines promise the emancipation of capitalism’s victims by the inevitable proletarian revolution of *The Communist Manifesto*: “No prison bars are tough enough / No steel so very strong / But history will deliver us / In Bolshevik Revolt!” Both “A Lumpen” and “An American Diary” position, in their very paper materiality, the lumpenproletariat’s political negativity as a deconstructing symptom of the certainty of *The Communist Manifesto*.

Roland Barthes argues in *Mythologies* that the rendering of that negativity can be an effective means of socialist propaganda. Charlie Chaplin’s tramps, he proposes, are representations of the proletarian not as militant class-conscious worker, but as what we can recognize as the *lumpen*proletarian, or “the proletarian still blind and mystified, defined by the immediate character of his needs, and his total alienation at the hands of his masters” and whose utter material deprivation keeps him “always just below political awareness” and “as yet unable to reach a knowledge of political causes and an insistence on a collective strategy.” This allows Chaplin to represent the full range of capital’s degradations, a representation that portraits of the virtuous class-conscious worker must

necessarily delimit. The tramp's blindness to all idealisms—whether postulated in the name of his liberation or repression—keeps alive and open, in Chaplin's work, the question of anti-capitalist analysis and revolutionary strategy while at the same time questioning the validity of idealisms. "To see someone who does not see," Barthes argues, "is the best way to be intensely aware of *what* he does not see." Chaplin's tramp always resists being figuratively "organized" by any side in the class struggle: "he escapes from everything, eschews any kind of sleeping partner, and never invests in man anything but man himself." A sort of unconsciously resolute materialist, he is always "politically open to discussion" and thus "represents the most efficient form of revolution in the realm of art." Algren never imbues his Depression characters with any of Chaplin's tramp's romanticism, but Algren's cognitively-lacking lumpen also symptomatically trouble the universality and validity of both national narratives (already under fire in the crisis of the Depression) and proletarian triumphalism. If Algren's 1930s lumpen characters demonstrate the devastating impact of ideology upon their cognition, they also call attention to the limitations of proletarian politics in combating ideology.

If Cass McKay of *Somebody in Boots* had read Wright's "Spread Your Sunrise!" he would have been doubly confounded. For one, the symbolic utopian content of the signifier "red" would be unintelligible to him, since nothing in his experience would have instructed him in how to interpret it. Yet the revolutionary violence also suggested by the signifier would alienate him. Cass is revolted by violence, and though he "was to live all his life" among the violent lumpen, "he would be sickened almost to fainting" at the sight of blows and bloodshed (37). Since various forms of violence structure the experience of the lumpen and the mechanisms that serve to keep them socially, economically, and cognitively deprived, violence in the service of emancipation is unthinkable to Cass. This failure of cognitive discrimination is one of the many ways in which Cass is never able to perceive the ideological nature of his experience: i.e., he is never able to theorize *beyond* the terms it provides and to imagine new possibilities for himself and for the sociopolitical betterment of the lumpenproletariat.

Algren's epigraph from *The Communist Manifesto* explicitly announces the novel's theoretical project, and critics have recognized *Somebody in Boots*'s engagement with the concept of the lumpenproletariat since its release. Philip Rahv praised the novel

as “the first complete portrait of the lumpenproletariat in American revolutionary literature,” since it took Marx’s concern with the reactionary tendencies of the lumpen and developed it in a specifically American context. It was, he declared, “the first Marxist portrayal of box-car men and their ways” and “authentically American” (64, 63). The best recent scholarship, by William Maxwell and William Solomon, has followed in Rahv’s footsteps by exploring how the novel critiques both institutional Communism and American nationalism from the perspective of the lumpen. That the lumpen are positioned by Algren as a conceptual disruption of both revolutionary and hegemonic epistemologies has long been noted as Algren’s explicit, announced project in the novel.<sup>15</sup> Yet the novel’s immanent examination of experience itself (what Althusser would call ideology) as the source of the lumpen’s cognitive inability has not been fully illuminated, nor has Cass’s very inability to theorize been grasped as the base cause of his political alienation.

Further, while William Solomon has attended to the role played by certain tropes in the novel, he assumes that they constitute a sociopolitical critique of Algren’s that is distinct from the consciousness of Cass. For a novel generally narrated in free indirect discourse, Solomon notes that the narrator’s “critical discourse”—which becomes explicit in interpolated jeremiads against capital at the end of the novel—is an “obvious split” between narrator and protagonist (133). William Maxwell describes the narrator’s interpolations as “luminous alternative discourses” beyond the “purblind vision” of Cass (191). Solomon argues, however, that because the lumpenproletariat “still provides the offensive imagery” of prostitution and burlesque with which Algren figures an anti-capitalist critique, the split is partially mended (133).

Algren’s figurative critiques in *Somebody in Boots* do draw their vehicles from the experiential milieu of the lumpen, particularly the trade of prostitution. They thus fall in line with a long tradition in left-wing literature and thought that generalizes the exploitations of prostitution to the broader exploitations of capitalism. As far back as the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx wrote: “Prostitution is only a *particular* expression of the *universal* prostitution of the worker,” who alienates his essential human self in the capitalist labor process (350). Yet the novel’s narrative-level anti-capitalism is not the “luminous alternative discourse” Maxwell describes. Algren’s figurative critiques

of capitalism as prostitution *break down* and in fact fail to describe capitalist processes adequately. This failure is certainly due, in part, to the prostitution/capitalism metaphor's lack of analytical precision: when prostitution is generalized as an expression of capitalism, the differential nature of prostitution as a gender-based form of exploitation is erased. What gets lost is the functional operation of prostitution as a singular mode of capitalist relations. Materialist sociopolitical analysis must grasp what makes prostitution *unlike* other exploitative relations even as it totalizes prostitution within the structure of those other relations. As a figure, prostitution/capitalism tends to sacrifice concrete knowledge to rhetorical emphasis.

However, it is also possible to approach the problem of this metaphor from a poststructuralist perspective on language. Another reason for the metaphor's failure is the necessary indeterminacy of metaphor, or what Paul de Man describes as the "asymmetry" between "the figural" and "the proper meaning of the figure" ("Epistemology" 49). This failure, of course, is paradoxically the source all metaphors' success: the figural meaning of a figure is *always* in excess of its proper meaning. The space of that excess, the gap between the proper and the figural, is a complex and uncertain epistemological region in which the end of knowledge can be advanced or frustrated. This is what makes it possible for the nebulosity of a specific sociopolitical figure, prostitution/capitalism, to both obscure and advance Marxist theoretical production, to indicate the complex interrelations of the social totality at the same time that it obscures their precise functioning. Through his exploration of this metaphoric incoherence, Algren remains much closer to the cognitive delimitations of his protagonist than critics of the novel have previously appreciated. If the experience of the social world in which lumpen subjects act does not, of itself, offer cognitive knowledge of real social processes, Algren's figuring of the experience in part replicates that lack. Yet the breakdowns, slips, and excesses of his lumpen figuring in *Somebody in Boots* clear a space for the politically inventive and productive figurative work that would characterize the projects of his post-1930s texts. The novel discovers both the cognitive imprecision and potential of literary and lumpen figures, a paradox that Algren would negotiate for the rest of his career.

At the start of the novel, Cass McKay is a fifteen-year old poor white from Great-Snake Mountain in Texas. His father, Stub, is a hard-drinking violent man whose

outbursts make it impossible for him to hold down a job. His older brother, Bryan, is a World War I veteran traumatized by the war. Cass's older sister Nancy is a "strong" girl enthused by the beauty of nature (15). Their poverty is endemic and predates the Depression. It stems instead from their historically outmoded standing as the descendents of pioneers: like their "old and unpainted and rotting" home that "appeared somehow to have been in its place for but the past few days," these "descendents of pioneer woodsmen . . . too had no roots. They too were become half-accidental. Unclaimed now they lived, the years of conquest long past, no longer accessory to hill and plain, no longer possessing place in the world." Giving a specifically American context to Marx's description of the lumpen in *The Communist Manifesto*, Algren concludes: "They too were rotting" (16). Stub's temper—the reproductive agent of the McKays' continued poverty and social marginalization—arises from what he calls "The Damned Feeling": "[a] feeling of having been cheated" by "someone behind him or above him," a feeling that pains him "like an old hunger" or a "half-healed wound" (12). Stub's violence emerges from his inability to understand the larger socioeconomic and historical forces that have produced his position—unlike the worker temporarily thrown into the ranks of the unemployed by economic crisis, the McKays are utterly removed from the standard identifications of left-wing politics. According to Algren, they are not just temporarily out of work, but are more or less permanently exterior to the material reproduction of the social as excessive, non-necessary remainders from an earlier historical phase. The negativity of their ragged status as *lumpenproletarians* is absolute: not simply ragged, they are decomposing, rotting. Thus, the novel will be unable to refigure Cass's raggedness into the positive possibilities of paper (indeed, Cass himself is barely literate for much of the novel, unable to "read," to analyze, his experiences, much less *write* new knowledge or cognition out of them).

Cass flees home after his father, in a rage, beats Bryan, castrating him by kicking him in the groin repeatedly with his boots. The rest of the novel deals, in episodic fashion and in gruesome detail, with Cass's hobo wanderings across Depression America. Eventually Cass ends up in Chicago, where he becomes romantically involved with the prostitute Norah Egan. Cass and Norah make ends meet with a string of robberies, until Cass is arrested in the middle of a heist. When he gets out of jail, he attempts to find

Norah while working as a pitchman for a burlesque house. Dill Doak, a black musician who performs at the burlesque theater but who, offstage, is a Communist, attempts to politically educate Cass by taking him to Communist rallies. Yet Cass is only confounded by Communism: he cannot comprehend any alternatives to the violent experiences he has known. At the end of the novel, failing to reconnect with Norah or to be integrated into the Communist movement, he returns to the open road with a sharp-booted racist hobo named Nubby, who beats him for having associated with Dill Doak. His only aspiration is to get “Hell-Blazer” tattooed on his chest. It is an ending of pure negativity, of unproductive cancellation: Cass’s closing conviction that “[i]t was time to be getting on” contains no utopian potential, no hint of possibility (254). He is not Althusser’s materialist philosopher, taking to the “open road” of new political options and knowledges. Rather, he is absolutely removed from all options for political or personal development: he is caught in ideology, quite literally going nowhere.

Cass’s consciousness remains ideological because it never moves beyond the terms of his experience. The world, and his imaginary relation to the world as a subject, remain ensconced in their apparent obviousness: his experiences are misread, by him, as necessary or natural. He continually repeats Althusser’s scenario of the subject who (mis)recognizes the status of his subjectivity in the tautological self-evidence of experience, who responds “That’s obvious! That’s right! That’s true!” to experiences whose obviousness is the very means by which they reproduce class rule. Cass’s experience is one of unremitting violence committed by men in boots. In the text, “boots” are a synecdoche not even for the men committing the violence, but for pain itself: when Cass experiences hunger, he feels it as “[s]omebody stomping [on his stomach] in boots as sharp as his father’s had been; as pointed as Nubby’s had become” (141). Understanding it only in its pervasiveness, without discrimination or distinction as to agent or occasion, he is unable to apprehend the sociopolitical function of that violence. As such, he naturalizes it, which will make him unreachable to the exhortations and organizing attempts of the Communist-led proletarian revolutionary movement.

In his initial flight from home, Cass goes to New Orleans where he is beaten by a pimp and, in his pain and thirst, denied drinking water at a gas station and beaten by the booted attendant. Boots, Cass decides, are both fearful and empowering. In New Orleans,

needlessly kicking a dog “with his shoe” makes him “feel a little better; as though the boot had been put on the other foot for a change” (52). He returns to Great-Snake Mountain with the raw materials of an experience that *could* be worked into sociopolitical understanding:

He had learned that for him, Cass McKay, there was no escape from brutality. He had learned that, for him, there was no asylum from evil or pain or long loneliness. It might be that for others there was something different; but for him lonely pain and lonely evil were all that there was in the whole wide world. The world was a cruel place, all men went alone in it. Each man went alone, no two went together. . . . There were only two kinds of men wherever you went—the men who wore boots, and the men who ran. . . . If you could get much you were strong, and therefore good; God gave to the strong and took from the weak. He was on the side of the ones who rode in autos, who lived in white houses. (55)

Cass’s thinking is ideological. Since he has experienced nothing but brutality, brutality is how he misrecognizes his subjective place in the world; the immediacy of his experience constitutes the limits of his reflection upon that experience. Algren’s text makes it clear that his experience offers material for productive analysis, but to engage in that analysis would require a second-order figurative labor upon Cass’s consciousness. Algren, or the reader, would need to convert the immanent terms of Cass’s subjective experience into *figures* for the objective sociopolitical causality of his experience. For instance, his exposure to sheer physical brutality allows him to perceive a binary of exploiter and exploited at work in capitalist society, but he can only conceptualize that binary in terms of physical cruelty and relative strength and weakness. Cass’s distinction of the “two kinds of men” could be a figure for the class struggle, but here it is merely a literal statement. Likewise, the term “white houses,” if converted into the metonym “White House,” could figure the complicity of the ruling economic class (“those who rode in autos”) with the repressive institutions of the U.S. state. But Algren refrains from making these moves. Through free indirect discourse, he positions his novel’s perspective alongside the ideologically-limited lumpen consciousness.

In another early scene, Cass notices what the reader will recognize as a common paradox of the Depression era: scarcity in the midst of abundance. In a harsh winter, Cass reflects that “Nance is colder’n me ah guess. But down at the yards there’s logs eight foot high, an’ every freight fo’ the last six weeks has been haulin’ coal through here. Seems

like a little mought come our way, oney it never do” (67). Cass attributes this lack to chance since that is the most obvious, most immediate explanation. Slightly later, Nancy seeks a mystified religious explanation for their suffering: “Mebbe we been sinnin’ and he [God] are punishin’. Y’all been sinnin’ Cass?” Cass responds that “the wrongest sin we done, sister, was just bein’ bo’n hungry in a pesthole in Texas.” But as if to validate her suspicion—to provide some explanation for the experience of deprivation—Nancy suddenly and hysterically accuses Cass of having sexual designs on her: “Caint yo’see ah’m ‘most *nekkid*? . . . Go awn now—ah know what your aimin’ at well enough.” Cass is confused: “He had heard her, and he had not understood. He was too hungry to think it all out into a clear understanding” (69). Nothing in their experience allows Cass or Nancy to grasp its real origin: Cass’s understanding of deprivation as nothing more than it is, and Nancy’s attempt to explain it through religious guilt, are equally ideological.

This focus on the opacity of experience distances *Somebody in Boots* from the body of 1930s proletarian fiction, which tended to authorize the truthfulness of unmediated, spontaneous depictions of experience. As Barbara Foley explains, critics of the proletarian literary movement often “assumed that left-wing class consciousness was in some way intrinsic to subject matter.” Such critics assumed that “reality, the realm of the objective, supplies the terms of its own transcription without the mediation of perception, analysis, interpretation” (115). Depicting the experience of capitalist society—particularly from a working-class perspective—was thought by itself to be a guarantee of a text’s political clear-sightedness. Mike Gold insisted that the working-class writer’s unmediated narrative of his experience was epistemologically and politically certain. In fact, his experience can *only* be couched in its immediate terms: “He writes in jets of exasperated feeling and has no time to polish his work.” He has “few theories” and is “all instinct.” Gold implored worker-writers: “Write. Your life in mine, mill and farm is of deathless significance in the history of the world. Tell us about it in the same language you use in writing a letter. It may be literature—it often is” (188-9). Gold assumes that experience speaks for itself—figuring that experience, working it over through literary practice, is the needless luxury of bourgeois writers. By insisting on the opacity of lumpenproletarian experience, Algren makes an implied critique of this “workerist” position. Perhaps the experience of the working-class subject was more

conducive to political knowledge: after all, institutions like labor unions and left-wing labor-based political parties were more or less structural realities of working-class life. But the obstacle to knowledge posed by lumpenproletarian experience is exactly why the lumpen's "conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue."

If the spontaneous consciousness of opaque experience leads only to mystification, time and security for reflection and theoretical work are necessary. Yet not only does Cass's hunger block thought ("He was too hungry to think it all out into a clear understanding"), Cass's transience allows him no respite from the characteristic violence of the lumpenproletariat. When he embarks on the road again later in the novel, he is kept in perpetual motion: "there was no standing still and there was no turning back. No place to go, and no place to rest. No time to be idling and nothing to do. He moved, moved, everything moved; men either kept moving or went to jail" (80). These negatives produce *not* an image of future positivity inflected by present prohibition (as negativity does in the title of *You Can't Sleep Here* or in *Waiting for Nothing*) so much as the pure positivity of continual movement; they merely cancel, rather than open up, possibilities for difference. And even jail is not really a "place to rest": in *Somebody in Boots*, jail is a violent social system with hierarchies (racial and otherwise) among the imprisoned. Nubby O'Neill, who presides over the communal jail cell in which Cass serves time in El Paso, brags of having busted the head of the cell's last black prisoner with "the heel of his battered boot" (131). The lumpen lack the spatial and temporal distance from their experience for the cognitive processing necessary to turn that experience into knowledge. And as William Maxwell demonstrates thoroughly, the white lumpen as well as the repressive apparatuses of the state engage in the violent policing of white privilege. Cass must internalize and perform racist modes of thought and action or endure severe beatings from lumpen like Nubby, who seeks to make a "*real* white man" out of Cass (129). In Maxwell's words, "[a] sweeping system of social coercion . . . enforces Cass's will to whiteness. The periods in which he fails to recall his hatred of African Americans invariably end in confinement and pain" (194).

In a novel and a political landscape in which "Communism and antiracism [are] imperatively synonymous" (Maxwell 195) the compulsion to perform white racism

makes the interracial Communist movement strange to Cass, as it is to the narrator of “A Lumpen.” He is temporarily able to escape this compulsion in Chicago, but with no cognitive gains. When he first meets Dill Doak, Dill’s Communist militancy defamiliarizes Cass’s racist notions of blackness: “Although on the stage he was a light-footed, dance-loving, song-loving, rubber-limbed muppet, full of a rich, black belly-laughter, yet offstage he spoke and acted in a way in which Cass had never seen or heard a Negro speak or act before” (227). Yet the Communist militancy that distinguishes this “new Negro” is unintelligible to Cass because nothing in his previous experience prepares him for it. Cass grasps Communism only as something afoot, something new and secretive, among African Americans. He is reminded of “black folk” from the South who were always “thinking quietly to themselves, but saying nothing.” “Sometimes Cass had had the feeling that Negroes, everywhere, were listening to some strange new thought, sometimes half-unwillingly, sometimes eagerly” (242-3). Yet he cannot qualify that strange something, and Communism remains inscrutable to Cass.

The Communist program, with its commitment to anti-racism, registers to Cass only as an empty difference: it makes him temporarily reconsider sedimented stereotypes of blackness but does not provide him with any new understanding. And he certainly doesn’t grasp the interracial nature of Communism: this strange new thought is not one that he ever thinks *he* should have. The racial obstacle to Cass’s political education is not only the violently-enforced necessity of performing white racism, but is more fundamentally the contours of Cass’s interpellated subjectivity as white. Since Cass (mis)recognizes that subjectivity as tautologically “true” and given, interraciality fails to penetrate the subjective limits of his cognition. Again, Cass’s experiences *have* offered him material to problematize the naturalness of his racial identity. Earlier, he had been arrested with a black hobo named Matches by a cop who refers to them both as “niggers.” Cass learns a lesson in performative racism—“a white man who walked with a ‘nigger’ was a ‘nigger’ too”—but he fails to grasp the deeper point, mainly, that his socioeconomic marginalization positions his interests in proximity to those of African Americans. Riding to the jail, Cass turns to Matches “accusingly” and declares “Ah’m not no nigger.” Matches replies: “You’re ridin’ jest the same, ain’t you?” (122, 125). The strange new thought of Communism *should* appeal to Cass, but he never learns the

underlying truth of Matches's response. Instead, Cass always "knows" that he is white (even though he endures beatings at times for not being white enough), and the ideological nature of that identity naturalizes it as a horizon of experience that Communism remains beyond. Interraciality requires one to think outside the bounds of one's interpellated (racial) identity, to critically examine the constructed origins and limitations of that identity. Cass is never capable of such self-examination, so when he witnesses interracial collectivity at a Communist rally in Washington Park, he has no cogent response at all, not even a performed racist response. He simply doesn't know what it means: "fists shot upward into light-black fists, white, and brown—and everyone was standing up and singing. Cass did not quite understand all this" (243).

Racial issues aside, Cass also cannot decipher the subtext of the militant Communist rhetoric he hears at the rally. At one point, a speaker declares: "*—What's good fo' the bosses ain't no good fo' us!*" Cass, confounded, "thought the applause then would never end, and he was puzzled to know why the girl's simple assertion should have provoked such wild cheering" (244). Only able to hear any message as a "simple assertion" containing no meaning beyond its literal self-evidence, the implied political significance of the speeches fails to register. "Let's go, Dill," he says eventually. "They talk sech lawng words that it don't all make sense" (245).

Cass's inability to order his experiences—to submit them to any process of classification, measurement, or relation—also contributes to his political ignorance. Early in the novel, Cass's father, in his last fit of rage, kills the man who has supplanted him in his most recent job on the railroad. Afterwards, the mob that will eventually lynch Stub gathers outside the McKays' house, and its threat makes an indelible impression on Cass's senses: "A mob has a face with a single mouth. Opening, closing. It has one long hand with a thousand fingers, it points at a house, it weeps and hisses" (73). The specific origin of this threat is, in Cass's mind, generalized into a monstrous figure: the tactile grotesqueness of the image, in vivid excess of its actual referent, blocks Cass's ability to discriminate among collectives. This mob-monster, like the boots of the title, is at once an epistemologically-inadequate figure and a figurative rendering of Cass's inability to understand his experiences.

Later, in Chicago with Norah Egan, Cass witnesses a Communist eviction protest next door. The political possibility embodied in the protest does not register to Cass, for whom an eviction protest is so outside the bounds of experience that he cannot even discern what he sees (nor can the uninformed reader):

Raising his head from the pillow, he saw grotesque shadows racing down a long red fence, jumping up and jumping down, waving monstrous arms over headless bodies, first running this way, and then, all with one motion turning, racing back in the direction they'd come. For a moment the red fence itself seemed to be moving. Cass became deathly afraid. Ever since the time in Great-Snake Mountain when he had seen a crowd pointing and shouting as though all out of one mouth he had been afraid, above all else that he feared, of a mob. (198)

Norah tells him that he's only seeing "a bunch of Reds puttin' on their act" and "Niggers an' white guys listenin' to a nigger talkin' from a car, an' a whole gang of sheenies runnin' up an' downstairs draggin' furniture into a house" (198). But in this instance, it is not an enforced performative racism that keeps Cass unable to parse what he witnesses. Rather, it is the inability to process an unfamiliar object of perception. Lacking the knowledge that would render intelligible what he sees (i.e., knowledge of Communist political alternatives), he resorts to the already-established terms of his subjective experience, in which the only collective he's witnessed before is the threatening lynch mob. Much of the monstrous energy of Cass's image of the collective lies in its *deforming* activity, its reduction of all collectives to the same figurative terms: the figure of the mob-monster obliterates the distinction between reactionary and progressive collective bodies. The particular vividness of Algren's prose in *Somebody in Boots* derives from this irresolvable tension in Cass's consciousness—and hence, in the free indirect discourse of the narrative—between figurative brilliance and epistemological deformity, from a capacity for image-making entirely dependent upon an incapacity for understanding.

By the end of the novel, Cass has no more knowledge of the structural forces that have shaped his conditions than his father did at the beginning. "There was someone who cheated, and all men were robbed," he decides (242). Algren recounts how Cass's experiences have locked him into a limited, ideological understanding of himself and his place in the social:

Cass sat in the front row and held his head in his hands. Sitting so, he would think of Norah Egan, of her life and of his own. Sometimes he felt that they had both been robbed, somehow, and he did not understand quite how. But whenever he thought of one man robbed by another, he thought of somebody in boots. He was an ignorant man. The real world he never saw. Daily he saw suffering and want, but he saw through a veil of familiarity. What he saw he took for granted. He could not trouble himself, one way or another, about any better or happier world. He had become too hardened to pain and to suffering. His heart had become calloused. . . . All those faculties which might have enabled Cass to see farther than the end of his nose had been dulled; they had been dulled into atrophy by hunger and cold and frequent humiliation. (230)

These short, declarative sentences capture the rhythm of Cass's inadequate consciousness, limited as it is to the brief, unelaborated facticity of his experience. In this way, even though the passage purports to be an external commentary *on* Cass's ignorance, Algren's prose positions him, as author, in proximity to Cass's consciousness. The passage is one instance of the novel's overall project: figuring lumpenproletarian ignorance from an authorial position within, rather than superior to, that ignorance.

Therefore, while *Somebody in Boots* wasn't Algren's original title, it's certainly the right one.<sup>16</sup> Hegel remarks in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that even though "sense-certainty" appears to be the "truest" and "richest kind of knowledge," "this very *certainty* proves itself to be the most abstract and poorest *truth*" because the immediacy of the object of sensory perception can only be indicated through terms like "this" and "here," terms which are actually *abstract* and universal (58-61). The "this" or other gestural term must be *qualified* for it to be sensible. This argument is how Hegel seeks to demonstrate that all knowledge is always already the product of second-order, linguistic mediation. Algren's title similarly demonstrates the poverty of sensory experience: the "somebody" extends, without distinction or meaning, to all of Cass's experiences of deprivation and oppression. "Somebody" literally gestures towards a *particular* sensory experience, but then reveals its epistemological inadequacy, becoming abstract as a meaningless universal. The title demonstrates the cognitive inability of a figure who can't "see farther than the end of his nose." Algren's second quotation from *The Communist Manifesto*, which serves as the epigraph to the final section of the novel and promises the necessity of the proletarian revolution with confidence, is thus surely ironic: "In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in

which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (233). Because of the nature of their experience and its deformation of their understanding, the lumpenproletariat constitute the structure of a symptom, the kernel of the real that destabilizes the confident universality of *The Communist Manifesto*’s teleology.

Interpolated into the novel’s final pages are two passages in which the narrator, using the occasion of the 1933-1934 World’s Fair in Chicago, constructs an elaborate figure in which the vehicle of prostitution totalizes and condemns capital, the state, the economic crisis of the Depression, and the Fair itself. These World’s Fair passages appear as editorializing ruptures of the novel’s free indirect discourse; they seem to possess a degree of political insight unavailable to Cass.<sup>17</sup> William Solomon is the critic who has paid the most attention to these jeremiads, which confidently predict the “red day” of revolution for capitalist America. He sees them as evidence of Algren’s impatience with depicting the limited understanding of Cass: “[t]he urgency of his need to denounce the event [the World’s Fair] causes the writer to push beyond the limits of his representational project” (132). Solomon goes on to read them as a grotesque critique: the Fair dresses up the diseased, deprived city (figured as a “dying prostitute”) in spectacle in order to conceal the actual miseries of capital. Algren—by casting this figurative critique in terms of dying prostitutes, urethral smears, pimping, and venereal disease—deconstructs the “aura of political idealism” with which capitalism tries to hide its degradations, “mocking a hypocritically constructed fantasy discourse by bringing it into contact with the debasing description” of prostitution and burlesque amusements (130-138). Solomon notes that while Algren “continues to insist on the epistemological authority of his figurations, it is evident that the force of the imagery has become crucial. Knowledge and truth yield the stage to the grotesque” (132).

By contrast, I argue for the motivation of the epistemological inadequacy of Algren’s figurations. Rather than a break in the novel’s general narrative style of free indirect discourse, or an intrusive act of didacticism, these World’s Fair passages are best understood as the *figurative emulation* of Cass McKay’s ignorance. Just as Cass cannot mentally move beyond the immediacy of his experience in order to arrive at knowledge of the social structure he inhabits, Algren’s figurative construction of

prostitution/capitalism is unable to pass from the immediate descriptive terms of its vehicle (the lumpen milieu of prostitution) to an epistemological rendering of the capitalist totality. In my reading of this extended figure, I seek to demonstrate that there is no strict sense to its proper and figural equations. However, as a consequence of this epistemological failure, the inadequacy of orthodox Marxism as a problematic for the production of theory is rendered visible.

To begin with, Algren understands prostitution as an exploitative condition for women, evidence of the resorts to which poverty can lead. Cass's sister Nancy turns to prostitution after their father is lynched and Cass leaves home (152-53), and Norah only enters into the trade out of material necessity (166). Algren thus participates in a long tradition of socialist writing that uses prostitution to indict capitalism as criminal. As Khalid Kishtainy writes, in the Western socialist tradition, "the female prostitute represented all the evils that have been brought about or multiplied by the capitalists. She represented the enslavement of women by men and the exploitation of workers by the capitalist crooks." Yet prostitution was a priority of political analysis for socialists. "[T]hey treated it as a mere symbol, a figure of speech or an example for illustration in their heated discussions on the nature and future of capitalism. To them, the problem was a very simple one caused by economic needs and destined to disappear with the abolition of poverty" (9). Prostitution furnishes Algren with a figure that can condemn the criminality of capitalism from the perspective of the prostitute, one of its most deprived victims. Yet as a figure in socialist discourse, it works primarily as a shocking (what Solomon would understand as a "grotesque") *condemnation*, not as a well *figured-out* analysis.

One problem with this figuration of prostitution is that the emotional force of the condemnation easily disrupts the clarity of the critique. Further, the gendered relations of prostitution are obscured in the equation of prostitution with capitalism, with the consequence of reiterating unacknowledged gender blindness. For example, consider Langston Hughes's 1934 poem "Cubes." Here, "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" are "the three old prostitutes of / France" who spread venereal "disease" (metaphorizing capitalism and colonialism, or "the old game of the boss and the bossed") to France's colonies in Africa (175-6). The figure slips, and its equational logic assigns responsibility

for capital's exploitations to its actual victims, as if colonialism were somehow caused by French prostitutes rather than by the capitalist class that sexually exploits them. Laura Hapke argues that in *Somebody in Boots* Algren, in part because he uses a metaphor of prostitution to condemn capitalism, views prostitutes as sexually corrupted women who survive by exploiting the already-deprived male poor (this view emerges despite what she sees as Algren's "lip service" to the understanding of prostitution as produced by capitalist inequity) (53-5). Hapke's critique is much more aptly targeted at Hughes; Algren, as I hope to show, tries to distinguish in his figurative logic between the three main players in the sex trade (pimp, prostitute, and john) in order to preserve, in his metaphor, that traditional socialist understanding to which Hapke finds him only paying lip service. However, Algren's figure proves inadequate to its task: caught in its own slips, contradictions, and obscurities, it ends up figuring nothing so much as the epistemological opacity of lumpenproletarian experience. Below, I provide a reading of this figure that reveals the drastic extent of its cognitive failure and makes clear that this is anything *but* a didactic incursion into (and in spite of) the text by a politically-conscious narrator. However, beyond the negative movement of the figure's epistemological collapse, I argue that a direction toward adequate sociopolitical theory is recuperated *through* that very collapse. The World's Fair passages rhetorically discount orthodox certainty and point the way to conjunctural, concrete theory.

Long before the World's Fair passages, Algren shows us an attempt by the lumpen to use prostitution figuratively. Early in the novel, a military recruiter tries to enlist Cass at a homeless shelter. Cass is uncertain and afraid of the recruiter because he "wore pointed boots." But then another hobo shouts out: "Don't listen to that army-pander kid—Uncle Sam is a old he-whore and that guy is his youngest pimp." The recruiter leaves, and yet another hobo tells Cass that the recruiter gets five dollars per recruit. Cass is amazed: to him, the recruiter does the same thing Cass did when he occasionally "recruited" johns for local prostitutes back home (38-39). However, it isn't quite the same thing. If the recruiter is the pimp for the whore Uncle Sam, then his recruits would be the johns paying the recruiter for the sexual favors of Uncle Sam. But the exploited party here *should* be Cass, whom Uncle Sam pays, literally, to use his body in military service. Uncle Sam is more accurately the john, Cass the exploited prostitute.

Of course, the overall sense of the figure is clear, and it works in much the same way that Solomon argues the Worlds' Fair passages work. But this scene, like the Hughes poem, slips in its figurative assignment of the dynamics of exploitation. The lumpen characters in the scene draw on their experiences with the exchange processes of prostitution in an attempt to explain the recruiter, yet those experiences fail to clearly illuminate the objectivity of this local instance (military recruitment) of social domination.

This inability underwrites the metaphoric breakdown of the World's Fair passages late in the novel. After a ten-month stint in jail, Cass gets out and encounters the Chicago World's Fair in full swing. Hawkers sell "World's Fair souvenirs," "World's Fair pimps" look for "World's Fair prospects," and spectacle abounds in Chicago: "never before had Cass seen its hunger-ridden streets decorated with flags, nor its whores selling tin souvenirs." Then, the passage slides from Cass's observations into Algren's mediation of them, as he tries to figure the prostitutes and pimps working the Fair traffic into a sociopolitical critique:

And now the city itself seemed a whore, selling a tin souvenir.

Now the city had been made to wear a painted grin and a World's Fair smile, in order that business (which had been ailing somewhat) be made whole once more. "Boost and buy!" the papers bawled, and radios along South State reechoed the frantic plea: "Boost our city! Buy! Buy! Buy!" The papers pleaded and threatened, mocked and cursed; then they cajoled: "Oh Buy! Only Buy!" The radios sobbed. The *Tribute* demanded: "Buy! Give! Buy! Give!" (Small boys who beg grow up into thieves, small girls into dollar-whores.) "But say, ain't the Enchanted Islund [sic] perty, dearie?" "*Boost the Fair! Boost the mayor! We want dollars, we don't care—Just Buy! Buy! Buy!*"

But it seemed that some people no longer had money, because they had spent it all like water, or had been altogether too thrifty, or had invested unwisely. (219)

The metaphor makes the Fair "a painted grin and a World's Fair smile" upon the whore Chicago "in order that business . . . be made whole once more." The news media desperately tries to pimp this whore to consumers, or would-be johns, whose inability to purchase her stems from the maldistribution of income characteristic of the Depression. Hence, a metonymic chain seems to link the literal whore selling a tin souvenir to the city itself, which masks the true decay of its "hunger-ridden streets" with pageantry in an attempt to jump-start consumer spending (the selling of tin souvenirs). But on closer

inspection, the figurative equation begins to collapse. If the city/whore is decked out and pitched in order to *financially* profit “ailing” business, shouldn’t business, not the media, be the pimp of the figure? After all, it’s the pimp who ultimately derives *financial* profit from the prostitution exchange in which he exploits both john and prostitute differently. As the figure reads, the media is pimping the city in order to benefit capital, making the media an unusually self-sacrificing pimp. Yet since business is “ailing” from the same economic causes as the “hunger-ridden streets,” it is *also* suggestively aligned with the diseased prostitute who has to be dressed up to attract johns. However, if one doesn’t distinguish agency between the news media and the city in the passage, one could read the figure as saying that the city/whore is *herself* desperately enticing johns in order that its pimp, business, can ultimately profit from the sexual exchange. This reading makes more sense, but it would evacuate the *exploitation* of the city, at the hands of business and its mass media outlets, from the figure. But this concern aside, why is the city not just a whore, but a whore “selling a tin souvenir?” If the *body* of the figurative whore is sold to benefit business (and thus serves as the “commodity” being pushed on potential consumers), what is the figurative status of this tin souvenir that the actual whore sells to *supplement* her regular trade? Since this first phase of the extended metaphor ostensibly stems directly from Cass’s conscious perception of a whore selling tin souvenirs, its explanatory haziness underscores the opacity of Cass’s consciousness.

However, the purported structure of the figure becomes even more confused with the following parenthetical addition:

(Just as in the final stages of syphilis a dying prostitute is given an urethral smear, so did a World’s Fair now seek to conceal the decadence of a city sick to death. This city was trying with noise and flags to hide the corruption that private ownership had brought it. The *Tribute* was its smear. The *Tribute* gave glamor to its World’s Fair reportage, but said nothing of homeless thousands living in shelters, not a word about women being forced into prostitution under its very nose. . . . The *Tribute* was the World’s Fair’s pimp. Its concern was for the money-bags of Lake Shore Drive, of Winnetka and Wilmette; it had no concern for truth.) (219-20).

The precise figurative equations between prostitution and capitalism are now even murkier. The Fair has become a urethral smear *given* to the “dying prostitute”/city (which presumably metonymizes capitalist society *in general*) to mask its “disease,” or its poverty. But then agency shifts in the next few sentences: it is the “city” that is itself

trying to hide “the corruption that private ownership had brought it,” using the “urethral smear” of the *Tribute*’s glamorous, selective reporting. Where does agency for the prostitute/city’s “disease” lie? That is, are we to understand “private ownership” as the capitalist class which, as the john, has brought “disease” to the city; or are we to understand it as the condition of the prostitute/city’s being privately owned by a pimp? And who exactly is the pimp who is benefiting from the efforts to disguise the “disease”—the media? Capital? Both? The *Tribute* is the “World’s Fair’s pimp,” whose “concern was for the money-bags of Lake Shore Drive.” Is the *Tribute* using the Fair to pimp the *whore/city* in order to profit the “money-bags” of the capitalist class (making it, again, a very unusual pimp), or is the *Tribute* drumming up sexual business for the *whore/Fair* by appealing to those “money-bags” as customers, running only the rosy kind of stories they want to read?

Later in the novel, Algren returns to this figure. He contrasts the exhortations of Cass, whose job is now barking up business for a burlesque house, with a speech by the mayor, who, standing on a platform, praises the Fair as “*the climax of man’s ideals*” and a “*historic milestone on our national journey toward greater and finer and better things*” (234). Just as Cass is barking for customers for the burlesque show, the Mayor is, Algren writes, “bawling a line for Big Business” (235). Algren then shifts into a literal account of economic hardships in Chicago. For example, “the steel-workers are talking strike again, and the city is behind with the cops’ and the mailmen’s pay again, and the two-bit politicians are playing the races, and some of the truck-drivers are scabbing to pay the rent; and some of the ward-healers are learning to pimp” (236). Like the ward-healers, the mayor too “has to pimp a little now and then to make ends meet: for the Chrysler outfit, or Standard Oil, or any other big-business scurve who has the money to pay. You understand. That’s what the mayor was doing over on that platform. . . . Pimping for the old whore called Chicago Business, painting her up for her last big Saturday night. Sure the mayor’s a pimp: a pimp for Big Business” (237).

Now *business* is a whore being bawled or pimped by the mayor. Solomon parses this passage as making the mayor “the middleman who arranges for capital to fuck the city” (136). But as the pimp, the mayor—not capital—is the one who would financially profit from capital *literally* fucking the whore Chicago: Solomon’s reading only works if

one takes it as the figurative parsing—that is, “fucking” in the colloquial sense of “exploiting”—of an already figurative construction. A more direct parsing of Algren’s figure is much harder to come by. The ward-healers “are learning to pimp” because, like the other examples, they need cash. Presumably, they make that cash by pimping the bodies of women in their wards (whom they control through the power arrangements of the urban party machine). But the mayor is apparently pimping some other sexually exploited “whore” to big businesses with “the money to pay” him for arranging the tryst. Although Algren usually means the *object* of the phrase “pimping *for*” to be the whore (for example, in the military recruiter scene), here it certainly wouldn’t make sense (given either the standard Marxist understanding of the state and capital, or the logic of prostitution) that the mayor would be both *exploiting* capital and being paid *by* capital for the privilege. Yet that seems to be exactly what is suggested by the final turn of the figure, in which the pimp/mayor’s whore is named as “Chicago Business.” The figure ends up saying that the mayor has to make ends meet by pimping for capital, which could mean either taking money from capital in order to find it a prostitute (the city?), or pimping capital to some john who may be simply a different form or instantiation of capital. Finally, this last passage ends with an image of the Fair that, while effectively grotesque, doesn’t clarify the analytical terms of the critique. Algren describes the Fair as a “great Century-of-Progress slut stretched out on a six-mile bed along the lake with Buicks for breasts and a mayor standing up to his neck in her navel making a squib-like noise,” and he claims with assurance that the “red day” will come for those who exploit this gargantuan prostitute (237-8).

The general message here is clear enough: capitalism, like prostitution, is an exploitative, corrupt, diseased system of buying and selling human labor and human bodies, and its corruption indicates that revolutionary negation is not far off. Using the figure of prostitution to make this anti-capitalist critique allows Algren to make a rhetorical move standard to Depression discourse, to dialectically invert the poles of criminality and social legitimacy in order to figure the ruling class as the real criminals. However, Algren’s rhetorical figure emulates the novel’s central lumpen figure (Cass) in that it remains caught in its experiential terms. By continually shifting the assignments of equivalence between prostitution and capitalism, the figure merely proliferates while

deferring its epistemological end: the production of theoretical knowledge of the relations and power dynamics of capitalist society. Algren's narrator is caught in the immediacy of lumpenproletarian experience (prostitution). Rather than an intrusion of a cognitively-superior, politically-aware voice into the novel, the passages transfer the cognitive inability of the lumpenproletariat to the macro level of the narrative itself. While primarily *about* the ignorance of the lumpenproletariat, *Somebody in Boots* is also a novel whose poetics, whose principles of construction and figuration, are drawn from that same ignorance.

One of multiple reasons for the inadequacy of the prostitution/capitalism figure is that the triadic relational model of prostitution (prostitute, pimp, john) is not easily mapped onto the dyadic model of class struggle (bourgeoisie, proletariat). In fact, the mobility of the prostitution/capitalism figure in the World's Fair passages suggests the explanatory inadequacy of orthodox Marxism's reductive version of class struggle: real, conjunctural social processes, it would seem, are much more complicated and overdetermined. Nor is the exploitation of prostitution easily equated with the exploitation of labor in the capitalist mode of production. The only character in the novel to relate prostitution and capitalism clearly is Dill Doak, the representative of Communist clear-sightedness. He rebukes Cass at one point for taking prostitution for granted: "Don't *you* think it's a sign of decay when women can be *bought*?" Cass agrees but thinks that prostitution is an inevitable part of social life. Dill responds: "It hasn't always been, and it won't always be, and it isn't all over. In Russia this is already a thing of the past. We must change the order of things here too" (242).<sup>18</sup> Dill uses prostitution only as an *example* of the malleability of unjust social institutions—he stops short of using prostitution as a figure *for* capitalism. Prostitution for Dill is not equivalent to capitalism but a sign of the impending collapse of capitalism. He doesn't necessarily see capitalism—as Marxism often does, and as Algren's narrator does—as the figurative universalization of prostitution. Doak doesn't provide theoretical insight into the exploitative workings of capital, but he avoids the confusions of trying to analyze those workings through the figure of prostitution. In other words, he rhetorically employs prostitution to make a limited point of political exhortation, not to reach knowledge of the social totality.

Thus, while the informed Communist militant invokes prostitution with some epistemological clarity, Algren, the lumpenproletarian-identified author, does not. Just as Cass cannot figure out the social objectivity of his experiences but accepts them as obvious in their apparent obviousness, Algren cannot figure cognitive knowledge *from* the experiential milieu of the lumpenproletariat. The Communist Nelson Algren thought proletarian collectivity was the lumpenproletariat's best chance for socioeconomic salvation in the 1930s: in his political affiliations and investments, Algren is with Dill Doak. But Algren didn't expect the lumpen to be able to recognize proletarian politics as the vehicle of their own objective interests, and it is that problem that *Somebody in Boots* complexly textualizes from the vantage point of the lumpenproletariat itself.<sup>19</sup>

Nonetheless, a crucial negative epistemological gain, a ground-clearing moment, is recuperated from this poetics of ignorance. In "Semiology and Rhetoric," Paul de Man demonstrates how rhetoric tends toward its own deconstruction. He proposes that this deconstruction leaves the reader "in a mood of negative assurance that is highly productive of critical discourse" (16), as it forces us to recognize the deconstructive play of language itself, a recognition that dethrones the authority of origins and opens language to a plurality of contingent acts of reading. Most crucial for my purposes is what I take to be the general spirit of de Man's (and much poststructuralist) understanding of rhetoric: i.e., that what he calls the "epistemology of metaphor" operates *through* rather than in spite of "the proliferating and disruptive power of figural language" ("Epistemology" 50). If Algren's passages on the World's Fair tell us anything for certain, it's that the social structure in dominance in any conjuncture is, as Althusser insists, a complex and internally differentiated totality that cannot be explicated through a static mimetic model. In textual dialogue with the novel's epigraphs—the revolutionary vision of *The Communist Manifesto*—the World's Fair section also suggests the political inadequacy of "red day" teleology that characterizes that vision. The lumpenproletariat is a symptom of the inevitable complexity of a given social conjuncture that reduces the confident narrative of *The Communist Manifesto* to an epistemological raggedness.

The indeterminacy of metaphor—the explanatory porousness and nebulosity of the figure—captures this epistemological "indeterminacy" of the conjuncture quite well. Just as Marx in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* turned to a limitation or

breakdown in one body of knowledge—the “nebulous figures” that bourgeois political economy failed to know—as the starting point for the development of a *new* knowledge that would not be proffered as an unchanging dogma but which would undergo shifts and re-figurings of its own, Algren’s novel occupies the delimited space of lumpenproletarian consciousness in order to gesture toward the necessity of both theorizing beyond that consciousness, and critically examining the proletarian discourses that fail to penetrate it. The shifting and differential logics of exploitation and domination that link the triad of pimp, prostitute, and john suggest the fluid and complex nature of social determination, in which the base economic relation of exploitation—the class struggle of the bourgeoisie and proletariat—is so overdetermined as to be cognitively unavailable to experiential consciousness. To use de Man’s terms, adjusting the “proliferating and disruptive power of figural language” to the complexity of the conjuncture will lead Algren, in his post-Depression work (particularly *The Man with the Golden Arm*), to some singular experiments in formal and political radicalism.

Thus, in the 1930s Algren immersed himself in the lumpenproletariat both literally and literarily, but he did so in order to indicate the need for theory to come from a source beyond the epistemologically-inadequate experiential position of the lumpen. In *Somebody in Boots*, he rendered the opacity of that experience, both narrating and rhetorically staging it. Algren’s treatment of the lumpen in the 1930s is still governed by the traditional Marxist problematic that sees the lumpen suspiciously, in terms of sheer limitation: here, the lumpen figure never overcomes its raggedness, its incoherence as produced by material marginalization. Its rags signify the material coordinates of its inherent limitation. In later periods and in later texts, changed sociopolitical conditions necessitate a shift to grasping the lumpen in terms of figurative possibility. The very marginalization of the lumpen figure then allows its rags to be recast as blank paper for potential literary and sociopolitical figuring in moments of increasing defeat and setbacks for the American left. When Cass McKay hops a train out of Chicago at the end of *Somebody in Boots*, he vanishes into absolute negativity: this ending signifies not the possibilities of mobility, but Cass’s final slide into what Algren sees as the social and discursive non-existence of the lumpen. In different historical circumstances, however, the negative exteriority of Algren’s lumpenproletarian figures becomes a source of

potential. Algren, through those lumpen figures, comes to resemble materialist philosophers who, in Negri's phrase, "take the revolution where the train of being leads them."

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> The best critical reading of *Never Come Morning* is given by Carla Cappetti in *Writing Chicago: Modernism, Ethnography, and the Novel* (156-181). Cappetti attempts to delineate the novel's "epistemological infrastructure" (180) by arguing for the influence on Algren of urban sociology as practiced by Chicago sociologists like Robert Park. Cappetti reads the novel as if it were a sociological study of urban Chicago, demonstrating how the discipline's influence (in terms of methods and guiding assumptions) allows Algren to empirically map the city and the relations between its social levels. Yet Algren turns a critical eye on sociology as well, she claims, as his characters "challenge the sustaining epistemology [of sociology] that condemns them to stereotypicality and denies them the privileges of individuality and typicality" (180). While the influence of Chicago sociology on Algren is backed by thin documentation and not always clearly visible in the novel, Cappetti's reading is generally productive. Especially interesting and instructive for my own purposes is her argument that Algren's poetic descriptions of the city, and his surrealist renderings of characters' consciousnesses, are designed to "guard both audience and text from the dangers of vulgar empiricism looming large in any novel that so loudly proclaims its 'veracity' and allegiance to the empirical slum and to social observation" (179). Cappetti is a rare critic who insists on Algren's simultaneous and interrelated sophistication on both sociopolitical and aesthetic fronts.

<sup>2</sup> For more on a non-humanist approach to biographical criticism, see Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (179-184).

<sup>3</sup> For a helpful overview of the critical debates on Nelson Algren, see Cappetti (144-155).

<sup>4</sup> Lenin's political resourcefulness, his openness to adapting Communist "content" to the contingencies of strategy, was described vividly by Walter Benjamin. To comment on the shift to state-capitalist economic policies that characterized Lenin's New Economic Policy in the 1920s, Benjamin considered portraits of Lenin. "The well-known picture of the orator is most common," but a different portrait of Lenin "speaks perhaps more intensely and directly: Lenin at a table bent over a copy of *Pravda*. When he is thus immersed in an ephemeral newspaper, the dialectical tension of his nature appears: his gaze turned, certainly, to the far horizon, but the tireless care of his heart to the moment" (130). Lenin, Benjamin saw, knew that the ultimate goal of classless utopia necessitated an infinite calculus of strategy in the present.

<sup>5</sup> It should be clear that Althusser does not hold that subjects under the sway of ideology (all subjects) are *simply* deluded. Ideology is epistemologically inadequate, but that inadequacy is the necessary condition of inhabiting a social subjectivity. Ideology is not a matter of a distinction between "correct" and "incorrect" consciousness. Rather, Étienne Balibar explains that ideologies are "unconscious":

[T]hey produce forms of consciousness for individuals and groups, that is, modes of representation, modes of 'being in the world' and subjective identities, always already knit together with non-representative elements (such as hopes, fears, beliefs, moral or immoral values, moves toward liberation or domination—possibly both). In doing so they must depend on conditions that no 'subject' can ever master or create himself: material constraints from the division of labor, the forms of property, etc., and the no less material constraints of language, desire, sexuality, etc. Ideologies are the various historical forms in which unconscious conditions can be elaborated to allow individuals and groups to imagine their own practices" (10).

The realistic limitations of subjective experience are the enabling conditions of theoretical practice, which can, to quote Balibar, "only be a protracted 'break' with particular, determinate ideological beliefs (not

with ideology as such)" (11). No subject "lives" outside of ideology, nor is the Marxist theoretical practitioner possessed with a consistent "scientific" consciousness. The immediacy of lived experience itself, since it is made possible by ideology (this, again, is the point of Althusser's well-known thesis that "you and I are *always already* subjects" ["Ideology" 117]), cannot be the route or the means toward the scientific break from ideology. Complaints like E.P. Thompson's, that Althusser's insistence on the ideological nature of lived experience is a "characteristic delusion of intellectuals, who suppose that ordinary mortals are stupid," simply miss the mark (10).

<sup>6</sup> Algren was in attendance at the conference. However, Algren was suffering from a severe depression at the time, caused in part by the commercial failure of *Somebody in Boots*. In the year of its release, *Somebody in Boots* sold only 762 copies (Drew 86-91).

<sup>7</sup> While the Althusser of *For Marx, Reading Capital*, and "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" is familiar (if not widely popular) in the discourse of American literature departments, the Althusser of "aleatory materialism" is less well-known (though this Althusser is a major theoretical ancestor of Antonio Negri's brand of post-Marxism). Emerging out of Althusser's self revisions in the 1970s (when he revisited his canonical theory and found it to be too far removed from the needs of the class struggle, and also distanced himself from the French Communist Party), "aleatory materialism" is both Althusser at his most political and Althusser at his most (apparently) post-Marxist. The relationship of this late phase to the canonical work is a complex problem for Althusserianism. Warren Montag finds an "unresolved tension" between "the demand for a science of history . . . with the emphasis on the singular and the unpredictable, the critique of all forms of irrationalism and skepticism with the notion of the imponderably aleatory" (133). Montag refers us to Balibar's penetrating observation that Althusserianism is bifurcated between "Althusserians of the Conjuncture and Althusserians of the Structure" (qtd. in Montag 133). It is perhaps only appropriate that Althusser's work presents itself to our reading as internally contradictory. In interpreting that contradiction, we can have no idealist recourse to an organically-unified "Althusser"; rather, he requires us to apply the same materialist reading practice to his own body of work that he applied to that of Marx. Althusser requires us to confront his theory as it is *given* (discontinuous, ambivalent, bearing the marks of the theorist's practice) rather than as it ought to be (the perfected architectonic elaboration of the philosopher's contemplation). Althusser's own theoretical anti-humanism means, then, that we should have no humanist illusions of the unified thinking subject when it comes to Althusser. In this dissertation, I articulate lines of continuity in Althusser's thought in order to strategically illuminate the contours of the literary projects of Nelson Algren and Ralph Ellison. The question of the relations between the various Althusserians, however, remains (productively) open.

<sup>8</sup> Even under the ameliorative efforts of the New Deal, unemployment rates never fell below 14.3 percent for the entirety of the 1930s. In 1933, unemployment hit 25 percent (by comparison, in 1926, unemployment stood at 1.6 percent) (Phillips-Fein 999, Patterson 42). Confronted by a reality of scarcity that contradicted ideological narratives of American abundance, many immigrants returned to their home countries. Immigrant and African-American communities in America were especially devastated by the Depression, as the banks and mutual aid charities and societies of these communities were wiped out by the downturn. Further indication of the Depression's destabilizing of American ideology is the fact that, in 1931, 100,000 people applied for jobs in Russia (Kennedy 164). The perceived stability and prosperity accomplished by Soviet state economic planning was seen by some as the superior modern alternative to laissez-faire economics. Peter A. Bogdanov, an engineer and economic planner in Russia, wrote in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* in 1932 that rational economic planning aimed to bring both material and personal well-being to Russian citizens. "Overproduction, depression, and unemployment do not occur in the Soviet economic system, where production and purchasing power grow concomitantly and where every aspect of the social-economic process is coordinated and planned in relation to every other aspect" (63).

The rise of the welfare state in response to mass unemployment necessitated state policies that sat in uneasy tension with traditional notions of American individualism and republican voluntarism. Herbert Hoover's near-religious investment in those notions had prevented him from confronting the unemployment problem directly during his presidency (Kennedy 44-47, McElvaine 51-71). By contrast, New York Senator Robert F. Wagner, a prominent liberal and member of Franklin Roosevelt's "brains

trust” of New Deal architects, articulated the limits that unemployment, poverty, and scarcity posed to conceptions of American individualism. The son of poor German immigrants, Wagner insisted that his own rise had nothing to do with individual merit: “My boyhood was a pretty rough passage,” he said in an oft-quoted remark. “I came through it, yes. But that was luck, luck, luck! Think of the others!” (qtd. in Watkins 296). Poverty was nothing new in the 1930s—rural regions, African Americans, and ethnics had long suffered from endemic poverty. But during the Depression, the unprecedented scale of lack impacted, challenged, and reshaped the structure of political discourse and the terms of ideology in America.

<sup>9</sup> For biographical information on Kromer, see the afterword entitled “In Search of Tom Kromer” in Arthur D. Casciato and James L.W. West III’s *Waiting for Nothing and Other Writings*.

<sup>10</sup> The place of lack or hunger in Depression literature has been treated in two major studies: Paula Rabinowitz’s *Labor and Desire* (1991) and Gavin Jones’s *American Hungers* (2008). Rabinowitz argues that women’s proletarian fiction of the decade engaged in a discursive critique of the masculinist proletarian response to hunger. For the radical male writers of the proletarian literary movement, hunger was a purely material lack to be filled by emulating the “virile pose” of the “heroic worker” (37). As a result, male-authored proletarian fiction tended to combat the emasculations of capitalist deprivation by recourse to hyper-masculine postures and discursive positions. Proletarian women’s fiction, on the other hand, approached lack as a potentially generative and utopian condition, and as a result brought a political complex of gender, desire, sexuality, and personal fulfillment *into* the sphere of proletarian class politics. While Rabinowitz’s is one of the most sophisticated studies of proletarian writing, literary strategies in response to material lack do not map onto gender difference as cleanly as she argues. As my chapter hopefully makes clear, Algren approached lack through figurative strategies that cannot be reduced simply to an anxiety about emasculation, and the figurative approach of his work imbues lack or limitation with productive impulses similar to those Rabinowitz finds in the work of women writers and their treatment of female desire. Gavin Jones faults much Depression literature—particularly *Somebody in Boots*—for depicting the poor as “utterly beyond the realm of social reform or class consciousness because consciousness itself has been crippled by poverty” (121). In his view, the best American literature on poverty has managed to examine the links between material lack and the cultural and social positions of the poor. For Algren however, Jones argues, poverty merely obliterates consciousness; the potentially rich dialectic between lack and consciousness (in its varied manifestations) is lost. I argue that *Somebody in Boots* is more accurately understood as figuring the general cognitive limits of consciousness and experience themselves. Furthermore, I demonstrate that the novel’s implied author is not necessarily more “knowing” than its delimited protagonist. In both respects, a politically-engaged treatment of poverty is motivated through creative and productive figurative strategies, bringing the novel in fact closer to the more complex representations of poverty favored by Jones.

<sup>11</sup> The friendship of Richard Wright was especially decisive, since both were fascinated by the lumpenproletariat. William Solomon has argued that Algren’s treatment of the lumpen in *Somebody in Boots* aligns with Wright’s consideration of the lumpenproletarian individual as an unstable modern subject, “a dispossessed and disinherited man” who is “looking and feeling for a way out” and who thus must be organized by the revolutionary proletariat before he is co-opted by fascist reaction (Wright, “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” 446-7; Solomon 123-4). William Maxwell earlier noted the alignment of Wright and Algren on this subject, arguing that they “shared what other Reed Club writers considered a suspect fascination with the lumpenproletariat” (180). Wright and Algren would continue to be close on intellectual and artistic matters throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s.

<sup>12</sup> Drawn into the Chicago Communist milieu through the John Reed Club, Algren’s political commitment to Communism was by no means casual. When changes in Party strategy required the dissolution of the John Reed Clubs in 1935 in order to establish the League of American Writers (an organization of accomplished writers from across the left-liberal spectrum devoted to the Party’s Popular Front anti-fascist coalitional policy), Algren embraced the change. He served on the League’s National Council in 1935-1936, and as the executive secretary of the Chicago chapter in 1938. In 1936, he was hired by the Illinois Federal Writers’ Project, where he was known as pro-Communist and did organizational work on behalf of the League (Drew 89-108, Folsom 266). During this time, he published in periodicals

affiliated with the Communist left: *New Masses*, *Partisan Review* (prior to its 1937 break with the Communist movement), and *New Anvil* (which he helped co-found with avowed Communist writer Jack Conroy). He seems to have avowed the Party line in most if not all cases. For instance, in 1938 he signed a statement supporting the verdicts in the Moscow Trials, Stalin's purge of Bolshevik leaders based on trumped-up treason charges ("Leading Artists").

He later claimed to have particularly admired the Communists for their fight against international fascism (Donohue 86-89). Indeed, in January of 1934 (before the Communist Party shifted in 1935 to a Popular Front policy that prioritized coalitional anti-fascism over revolutionary anti-capitalism), Algren drafted three lines of a poem called "Nazi," describing its titular subject as "bred in ignorance and in religion." He wrote the poem in Texas while working on *Somebody in Boots*, and it's likely that he intended to draw a parallel between German fascism and homegrown American forms of conservatism and racism. On the reverse side of "Nazi," he wrote a poem called "As Walt Might Have Put It," which satirizes in mock Whitmanesque style the "ten ranting millions of pimply-souled patrioteers" he surely encountered in the South. But anti-fascism was not the limit of Algren's Communism. He not only came into the Party's orbit in 1933 (two years before the Popular Front period), but he remained loyal to the Party in 1939 when it abandoned anti-fascism in the wake of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. In a 1942 review of *Never Come Morning* in the Trotskyist *Militant*, Lydia Beidel referred to Algren as a "Stalinite fellow-traveler" whose representational weaknesses in the novel (as she saw them) were rooted in the Communist Party's "ignorance of the essence of Marxian analysis" (4). Also, as the next chapter will demonstrate, Algren was, like many on the left, ambivalent about U.S. involvement in World War II: something more radical than anti-fascism animated his political commitment.

<sup>13</sup> He goes on to cite approvingly Degas's remark: "The artist must approach his work in the same frame of mind in which the criminal commits his deed" (*Nonconformity* 34).

<sup>14</sup> For images of both dust jackets, see Brucoli (4-7).

<sup>15</sup> William Maxwell shows how the text seeks to reinforce Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* warning to the Communists by identifying white supremacy as the ideological force that hinders the political consciousness of the lumpenproletariat (179-202). In a historical location in which Communism is equated with interracial anti-racist struggle, Cass struggles unsuccessfully to overcome the sedimented and violently-policed boundaries of white privilege, the last imaginary source of superiority for an economically-devastated white lumpenproletariat (193-195). Algren's text critiques the optimism of Communist interraciality and offers a "warning that the red day would never arrive unless the party acknowledged that competing lessons in white racism . . . were reinforced by prodigious violence" (200). William Solomon argues that Algren "frames *Boots* as a textual experiment designed to examine the validity of Marx's political theory" to "conditions in the United States in the 1930s" (124). He goes on to elucidate what he cleverly calls Algren's "vulgar Marxism": Algren employs the aesthetic category of the grotesque and tropes drawn from popular burlesque amusements to construct figurative critiques of "evolutionary models of scientific and technological growth" (125), which present themselves as high-minded and ideal even as they produce physical decay and death. As such, Algren's critique targets both the orthodox Marxist narrative of historical telos as well as hegemonic narratives of national progress (117-139).

<sup>16</sup> Algren originally entitled the novel *Native Son*, but the publisher changed it when a politician in California used it as a political slogan. Later, Algren allowed Richard Wright to use the title for his landmark 1940 novel (Drew 83, 120). William Maxwell uses the occasion of this shared title to compare the political aims of both novels (179-202).

<sup>17</sup> This is how these passages are understood by Maxwell (191), Solomon (132-33, 138), and Cox and Chatterton (72). Jack Conroy, in his review of the novel in the *New Masses*, surely had these passages in mind when he noted that Algren "sometimes indulges in direct invectives which seem merely hortatory and add little to the texture of the narrative" (22).

<sup>18</sup> Algren seems to have worked out an earlier version of this interracial, politically-pedagogic scene in his unpublished poem “Smart Nigger,” which he likely wrote in 1934. The speaker is a white hobo who recounts his meeting with a black hobo while riding a freight train in Texas. This black hobo “looked like he could fight,” according to the speaker. When the speaker tells the black hobo that he has come from Washington, D.C., the black hobo responds by narrating his own experience in the capital: “Ah oney saw that capital dome that once / Winter it was, and I was hungry too.” Seeing the capital dome made him speculate about “domes / ‘an pillars, colums [sic], buildin’s [sic], like o’ that; then pyramids.” In particular, he imagines “one pyramid jes’ as national-like / as any dome.” He describes a “human pyramid” composed of layers of female prostitutes white and black, “two-bit black girls” and “[d]ollar broads” and “chorus girls who lost their jobs.” The sociopolitical lesson is unclear, but the poem employs a figuring of prostitution in order to suggestively critique the exploitative practices of American capitalism. However, the last word in the poem belongs to the white speaker: “Smart nigger, eh? He looked like he could fight.” The black hobo’s figurative sociopolitical lesson is lost upon the cognitively-delimited speaker, for whom such a rhetorical display merely proves to him that he has encountered a “*smart* nigger,” and his estimation of the black hobo is the unchanged observation that he “looked like he could fight.” Racism combines with the physical, violent priorities of lumpen life—the need to recognize which other transients might be threats—to reproduce the ideological consciousness of the lumpenproletariat.

<sup>19</sup> While the World’s Fair passages are the most dramatic instance of an apparent distancing from the overall free indirect discursive style of the novel, there are briefer moments of narrative commentary on Cass’s experiences throughout that, while not always epistemologically illuminating, remind the reader that Algren’s authorial affiliation with the lumpen is, after all, a poetic conceit. Early in the novel, when the hungry McKays are unable to get milk from the local relief station, the reader is told: “Cheap as milk was, the cattlemen who ran the country feared to make it cheaper by pouring it out to charity. They poured it out to their hogs instead, and thus bolstered falling prices. Their consciences they salved by putting dollar bills in the collection plate of the First Baptist Church on Sunday mornings; and they gained the sanction of every truly patriotic Baptist in the town in the process” (31). Algren’s narrator later refers to a municipal statue in Chicago as “some butcher-on-horseback’s statue” (82). Commenting on the violent initiation rituals among the prisoners in jail later in the novel, the narrator comments: “The play-pretend of the underdogs aping the wolves on top, the man-child game at once so terrible and so ludicrous had begun again in tank ten” (137). Moments like this indicate a minimal level of cognitive ability beyond Cass’s own capacities. Yet in other moments, as with the World’s Fair passages, the meta-commentary reiterates Cass’s ignorance. In the novel’s most disturbing scene, Cass participates with white hoboes in the gang rape of a black transient woman (whose husband has been killed by a lynch mob). Cass is drawn to the assault by “a dark and terrible desire.” The scene ends with the narrative description of the assailants as “[t]hey were all of them men; they were men without women” (94). The tautological meaninglessness of this assertion as an “explanation” for the rape resembles the status of the act in the consciousness of Cass and the other rapists, for whom it has no significance beyond the fact of the act itself. Algren’s narrator knows better: the novel’s general anti-racism indicates as much, as does the echo in this scene of the 1931 Scottsboro incident, in which nine young black hoboes were accused, in a racially-charged trial, of raping two white homeless women in Scottsboro, Alabama. The defense of the “Scottsboro boys” was a *cause celebre* of the 1930s Communist left. Here, however, Cass and the other white lumpen simply fail to register any meaning, any non-obvious significance, to their action: lumpen experience bears with it neither ethical nor social coordinates, as this scene makes chillingly clear.

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## Chapter 2

### **Doing it the Hard Way: Nelson Algren, the Lumpenproletariat, World War II, and a New Internationalism**

In 1935, Algren composed a short piece for *The Anvil* that represents the lumpenproletariat in different terms than *Somebody in Boots*. “Within the City” describes a “mulatto girl” who dances at a dime burlesque in Chicago. Her audience is composed of the socially-dislocated, lumpenized victims of the Depression, “the ragged men . . . from the farms that are mortgaged now and the men from the mines that long since closed down.” The narrator imagines accompanying her back to her lodging, a room “three flights up and two doors to the rear.” As he imagines her ascent, he tries to reconstruct her thoughts: “I think that when she reaches the top she pauses and thinks, I am alone in this city now, and all about me are the alone men.” Collectivity, for Cass McKay, was an unthinkable prospect. But here Algren imagines the germinating desire for collectivity in a lumpen character marked as African American (which aligns her with Dill Doak, the figure of Communist radicalism in *Somebody in Boots*). This brief portrait closes with a forced affirmation of revolution: “it seemed to me that this city will one day flame into revolt from the quiet ways of such beings as this mulatto girl: that all the daughters of the poor will rise, their voices no longer docile, and that day is not far.” Unlike the jeremiad of *Somebody in Boots*, Algren hedges on the inevitability of this rising, signaling it as a speculation. Since this revolutionary vision is utterly implausible, it’s impossible *not* to read it as propaganda in the pejorative sense, as a rhetorical intrusion into the text. Nothing the girl does—and nothing her lumpen audience seems capable of—suggests revolutionary activity.

Yet this ending could be read symptomatically, as indicating a desire to understand the lumpen differently. It offers the parameters of a new project, one that assumes that the lumpen *can* provide resources for figuring revolutionary collectivity and praxis. This is why the girl’s class status is uncertain. She is socially proximate to the

lumpen underworld but still has a steady laboring position: she figures the *incomplete* state of the transfer, in Algren's work, of revolutionary collectivity from the proletariat to the lumpenproletariat. The exteriority of Algren's narrator with regard to the girl—he can only observe, record, and speculate—suggests that the lumpenproletariat *might* possess a phenomenal reality of its own that is invisible to orthodox Marxism; *maybe* something of political value lurks in her quiet ways. In “Within the City” we see certain elements—the lumpenproletariat as a possible source of potentiality, and a politically-coded African-American presence—that develop more fully in Algren's 1940s work as the result of a gradual break from Communism's devaluation of the lumpenproletariat. I adopt Althusser's concept of the “epistemological break” to conceptualize this change that occurs in the way Algren's fiction thinks about and figures the lumpenproletariat. The epistemological break is the mechanism through which a problematic—the relational framework of intellectual assumptions, investments, and absences that guides a given production of theoretical knowledge—internally develops.<sup>1</sup> When applied to Algren, the concept attunes us to the discontinuities in his literary practice, reminding us that writers change the way they think and the way, accordingly, they craft their writing. The incompatibility of Algren's figuring of the lumpen in “Within the City” and in *Somebody in Boots* stands as an early moment—perhaps the first—in the onset or emergence of a break in his literary treatment of the lumpenproletariat.

In this chapter, I read Algren's World War II short fiction, with sustained attention to the 1947 story “He Couldn't Boogie-Woogie Worth a Damn.” I explore the epistemological and political efficacy of this new practice of lumpenproletarian literature as it emerges within the contexts of the American left's response to the Second World War. No longer depicting the lumpenproletariat as an absolute negativity or obstacle to Marxist theory and practice, Algren's work after the Depression appropriates the lumpenproletariat as a figurative resource for the conceptual development of Marxism. The lumpen figure allows Algren to think new options for collective, international political identity in the wake of the Communist Party's de-radicalization during World War II. Particularly, the complex African-American response to the war and to the Communist left's shifting position on the war provide the historical context for Algren's revisionary work in “He Couldn't Boogie-Woogie Worth a Damn.”

### From Orthodox Communism to “Doing it the Hard Way”

Algren’s 1943 essay “Do It the Hard Way,” published in *The Writer*, indicates a shift in his valuation of the lumpenproletariat and its place within engaged literature. On the surface, he appears to affirm social realism, and he borrows its masculinist rhetoric to polemicize against writers who compromise their artistic integrity by writing *either* formulaic commercial potboilers or experimental prose for the sake of experimentation. Of this latter category Algren writes, cleverly employing the negative in a critical dialectical manner: “Their books . . . are artful dodges, *tours de force* which say nothing gracefully, or nothing lyrically, or nothing wistfully, or nothing hopefully, or nothing nostalgically, or—best of all—nothing mystically. But still: nothing” (68). *Real* writers, he insists, must “do it the hard way”—that is, they must mine the depths of their own experience to produce literature that renders “the world of reality.” But this reality, for Algren, is not just the private vision of the writer. Rather, it is an index of the writer’s immersion in the unpredictable flows and currents of contemporary social life and in the “common experiences of common humanity.” The experience of social life, Algren seems to be saying, is the basis of proper literature: “no studied effort at invention of literary images can ever replace the simplest sound of experienced reality.” Yet he does not reduce literature *to* unmediated experience: “to the creative writer, all experiences, whether noble or mean or sordid or simply pathetic, are the seeds from which his writing must grow” (70). Algren’s proper writer, it would seem, works with a “common” reality that is exterior to the writer’s persona, knowledge, and sensibilities. The real writer composes “[r]egardless . . . of what the writer himself prefers to believe, know, hear, think or feel.” Reality is out there to be discovered by the writer who sets aside romantic notions of authorship and *listens*: “in the talk of people, especially of those on the streets, lies an endless wealth of story-stuff” (71).

The essay seems to announce a literary procedure that is incompatible with the inventive one Algren put to work in *Somebody in Boots* and in much of his other Depression work. In those texts, the material deprivations of raw experience—the experience of the lumpenproletariat specifically—were obstacles to the realization of the *Communist Manifesto*’s vision of proletarian revolution. Accordingly, experience had to

be carefully worked over and framed by the writer in order to yield sociopolitical insights and knowledge. Now, Algren identifies a robust, poetic richness—“an endless wealth of story stuff”—in the experience of social reality. That experience is now epistemologically reliable, and “real” literature is its organic reflection, the plant grown from the “seeds” of empirical observation.

Or so it would seem. For there appears to be two warring tendencies here: between a naïve empiricism and between the literary transformation of empirical experience. Algren’s seed/plant metaphor captures this ambiguity: are we to read it as an organicist metaphor subjugating the plant (the literary text) to its root cause (experience)? Or are we to take it as a metaphor of literary work and processing, stressing the development of the text out of an experience that it is no longer identical to? A central claim of this chapter is that the language Algren employs in “Do it the Hard Way”—particularly the essay’s tendency toward a rhetoric of heroic empiricism—is misleading as an account of Algren’s own writing of the lumpenproletariat in the post-Depression era. This is in part because the essay obscures the political mandates for its proclaimed literary practice, and in part because the hardboiled tone of the essay’s thesis—“doing it the hard way” is getting past authorial self-conceit and just listening to reality, damn it—doesn’t do justice to the formal and political complexity of Algren’s World War II and postwar fiction. Hence, we need to read Algren’s reflections against the grain of this rhetoric and listen closely to the ambiguity identified above.

We can start by noting that the essay’s project is continuous with the Marxist priorities of Algren’s 1930s work. A guiding priority of the essay is to defend an American (often Chicago-located) realist tradition of socially-committed literature. The “boldest” of the writers who “do it the hard way,” for Algren, are John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, James T. Farrell, and Theodore Dreiser. All were affiliated with the left in the 1930s and all pursued social-critical projects in their writing, a legacy Algren alludes to in his coded description of them as “[m]en with something to say who have said it, each in his own fashion, without fear of public censure” (67-8). The essay testifies to the continuity of Algren’s conception of himself as a Marxist writer. By claiming a place in a tradition of committed novelists who predate and survive the Depression, he indicates that his 1930s work was no mere “red decade” flirtation with radicalism. So

even though the essay seems to distance itself from the kind of careful figurative work we saw in *Somebody in Boots*, that distancing is not a *political* shift.

Rather, the change imprecisely registered by the essay occurs within Algren's problematic as a writer, and it impacts his understanding of what Marxist literary practice entails. The essay indicates that this change is predicated upon a re-alignment of the three-way relationship among the social structure of the conjuncture, literary practice, and the production of social and political knowledge. The lumpen couldn't be trusted in *Somebody in Boots*; now, in a way, they can—their experiences themselves, rather than Marxism's traditional theoretical valuation of their experiences, provide “an endless wealth of story-stuff.” *Somebody in Boots* was informed by orthodox Marxism's suspicion that the cognitive limitation of lumpen figures made them a dangerous disruption of the proletarian revolutionary dialectic. It was this suspicion that motivated the anti-ideological poetics of *Somebody in Boots*, or the project that I refer to as a “poetics of ignorance,” the immanent critical figuration of that cognitive lack. But beginning in Algren's short stories of World War II in *The Neon Wilderness* (1947), the lumpenproletariat becomes refigured as a source of epistemological credibility and attendant political potential. The specific social experiences of the lumpen now offer positive material for a literary project that seeks to keep alive the energy of critical social commitment in historical conjunctures of increasing reaction.

To see what Algren means, then, by “doing it the hard way,” we need to take a detour into some figurative thinking. The difference between Algren's 1930s and 1940s fiction can be understood as a shift in the metaphorical raggedness of the lumpenproletariat concept. That raggedness moves from the sign of an absolute negativity to one of a productive negativity. The lumpenproletariat, as a concept, is ragged in that it is deformed, frayed, somehow incomplete. Hence, it is marginal to established, formed knowledge and discourse. Algren's post-Depression fiction demonstrates that “doing it the hard way” is developing a problematic for a literary project up to the task of grasping the epistemological and political potential of that marginality. This is why Algren, in this essay, at times sounds like a hardboiled realist: he wants to insist on the importance, value, and potentiality of lumpenproletarian experience. Yet empirical recording—journalistic or ethnographic work—is inadequate

because that potentiality is not just “out there” to be recorded. Rather, it inheres in the nebulous, figurative relations between a lumpen demographic and the *conceptual* challenge posed by that demographic. Those challenges, in their most general form, are challenges of innovation and reconceptualization—more precisely, the self-reflective work of theory. The Marxist writer, like the Leninist revolutionary, must adjust his or her practice to the social structure of given conjunctures as the demands of those conjunctures unsettle previous epistemological boundaries. The lumpenproletariat names the space beyond those epistemological boundaries into which theory must expand: the barely visible, liminal presence of the figure of the lumpenproletariat beyond the secure limits of knowledge and political doctrine (“on the streets,” in Algren’s essay) needs to be recognized. Then, it needs to be fashioned and worked through in literary practice, through formal and rhetorical *figuration*, if knowledge and politics are to avoid ideological stasis and remain *scientific*, or *adequate to* the changing social articulations of class struggle and the transformative work of politics.

“Adequate to” carries a precise signification in Louis Althusser’s epistemology, in which the scientificity of a given theory’s problematic is never secured by its *reflection* of concrete reality. This is the empiricist error that Althusser saw as the main shortcoming of many previous attempts to establish scientific criteria for philosophy. The reasons for Althusser’s rejection of empiricism are numerous (and motivated by concerns drawn from the history of philosophy as well as from the conditions of Communist politics), but one primary reason is certainly his insistence on the opacity of the immediate, or the ideological nature of the obvious. If empiricism supposes a concrete and reliable real to which the correspondence of a theory can be judged, it is necessarily at odds with Althusser’s position that reliable, real truths are never given but produced, and produced in forms of practice that take the “real” (in actuality, an ideological representation) as the *starting point* of that production. It is, admittedly, a notorious aporia in Althusser’s thought as to how the non-corresponding “adequacy” of a problematic is to be evaluated, but it seems possible to offer some general guidelines for doing so. First, the problematic’s adequacy must be guaranteed by criteria internal to the problematic itself, and not by extra-theoretical mandates. Althusser rejects any “universal” criteria for evaluating the scientificity of a problematic. Secondly, that

adequacy is in some way measured by the counter-intuitive effect of the juxtaposition of the problematic's objects of knowledge (what it produces in theoretical practice) with the socially-butressed obviousness of the ideology out of which they were produced. In other words, a problematic seems to be scientific if its workings allow us to grasp a reality that is non-coincident with the everyday, experiential "reality" of the social. It is here that the connection between scientific Marxist theory and political practice must be apprehended. Finally, Althusser emphasizes systematicity as differentiating a given theory's problematic as scientific. This systematicity is both synchronic (any concept in a science derives its significance from its functional relation to other concepts) and diachronic (it is open to development as a consequence of the dynamic succession of concepts—in other words, the relational logics of the theory's conceptual structure should ensure not stasis or self-reflective tautology but continual expansion, reinvention, innovation, etc.).<sup>2</sup>

For Althusser, then, Marxist theory is always something one "does the hard way": it is this labor of continual conceptual innovation that forms Marxism's scientific character. "A science lives only in its development," Althusser argues, and "a completed knowledge is a non-sense that sooner or later leads to a non-science" (*Philosophy* 16-17). For Algren, "doing it the hard way" is the work of getting beyond the "easy" static boundaries of Marxist orthodoxy and institutional Communist politics, and reinventing radical literary practice beyond those limits. The genuinely Marxist character of Algren's work after the 1930s, then, consists in its break from orthodox "Marxism" and its innovation of a problematic of new figurative procedures and political ventures. Algren's concern is still with the lumpenproletariat, and Algren still understands the lumpenproletariat as exterior to orthodox Communist discourse, but now that exteriority offers "an endless wealth of story-stuff," enabling bold, at times dazzling flights of radical figurative and political invention.

As the writer Edward Dahlberg recollected of his days on the Communist left in the 1930s: "No matter what hardships the *lumpenproletariat* suffered such people did not count. The Stalinists were also reluctant to admit that a man who employed his brains did any work at all" (284). Dahlberg puts the writer (construed here as a thinker, "a man who employed his brains") and the lumpen into a relation of equivalence based on their shared

exteriority to the Party as institution. The innovative Marxist writer, Algren's career demonstrates, must seek epistemological and political resources elsewhere when the discourse of official Communism is exhausted. Or in other words, when revolution is no longer credible as the necessary outcome of a historical process of proletarian class formation, the ragged margins of this proletarian narrative need to be energized. It is the still-emergent condition of this new problematic, in 1943's "Do It the Hard Way," that causes Algren to miscast his developing literary practice as one of ethnography or empirical recording.

Perhaps with the benefit of hindsight, Algren theorized this new practice more cogently in the 1950s treatise *Nonconformity*.<sup>3</sup> Here, he starts by making it clear that "doing it the hard way" is not just transcription: "the reportorial method affords an emotional detachment that makes a virtue of stenography," Algren argues, allowing the writer to remain uninvolved with his or her subject matter. Such writing might be commercially successful, but Algren finds it aesthetically inferior. He instead insists that the writer inhabit "the complexity and the pain of the living experience" (28). This requirement is more than a solipsistic account of the artist's role, and is not a defense of bourgeois aesthetic escapism: in the postwar era, the "living experience" the writer must plumb is that of the materially, socially, and psychologically alienated lumpenproletariat, the "enormous reservoir of sick, vindictive life that moves like an underground river beneath all our boulevards" (35). This is the life of those who "belong to no particular street in no particular city," who "pass from furnished room to furnished room, and belong not even to their own time; not even to themselves." They are "secret multitudes who belong to no world, no way of life, no particular time and place," the "uncounted and unbereaved in the files of the American Century" (36, 38). This marginal negativity is a source of knowledge: "the true climate of the human condition on the home grounds may best be gauged underground," Algren claims, by rendering the complexity and pain of those who "know the caves of their own country better than you or me." These are "the people of Dickens and Dostoevsky" whose secret, subterranean existence destabilizes the social dominance of and ideological universality proclaimed by "Business's billboards and Business's headlines and Business's pulpits and Business's press and Business's arsenals" (41-42, 50, 77).

Note that Algren carefully avoids casting the reality of these “secret multitudes” in empirical terms: they are the “people of *Dickens and Dostoevsky*,” or the critical energy of the lumpenproletariat as always already *figured* in literary practice. Indeed, the numerous descriptions of the lumpenproletariat that Algren provides in *Nonconformity* are all, as the few examples above suggest, conspicuously *literary* rather than reportorial in tone. Algren doesn’t use the term “lumpenproletariat” in *Nonconformity*, but the effect of his numerous descriptions (as catalogued in the previous paragraph) that limn the definitional contours of the term emulates the usefulness of the term, which encompasses the conceptual, theoretical, and representational lives of this demographic.

In Algren’s 1940s fiction, the lumpenproletariat is a figurative limit of postwar capitalism: writing about the lumpen is a way of imagining perspectives and methods capable of thinking politics accordingly. It’s a way of, to ventriloquize Algren, getting out into the streets, by which I mean getting outside the limits of the social structure and structural discourses in order to critique them. Algren’s lumpen, then, are like Ralph Ellison’s invisible man, who undertakes the labor of political knowledge production in a subterranean liminal space, a metaphorical hole not to be found on any social or political maps, somewhere on the border of Harlem and Manhattan. Algren’s work in this period is much closer to Ellison’s carefully-wrought, densely-symbolic novel of political process than has yet been recognized. Thus, this chapter begins to elucidate another guiding claim of my study: that reading Algren and Ellison from an Althusserian perspective can not only demonstrate similarities in two writers who have not previously been compared, but can also help us reconstruct our understanding of what radical Marxist aesthetic practices in American literature look like.<sup>4</sup>

### **Getting off the “Sweetest Bandwagon in All History”: The Party, the Popular Front, and African Americans in World War II**

In 1943, Nelson Algren was conscripted into the U.S. Army. He would see action in the latter stages of the war in Europe as a stretcher-bearer in an army hospital unit. He was a committed Communist and opponent of fascism but was deeply ambivalent about fighting Hitler in an American uniform. “[M]y feeling,” he later explained, “was although the Nazis had to be beaten, because of what they stood for, this didn’t necessarily mean

that we believed in exactly the opposite, that, if we won the war, then everything was going to be as it should be.” Suspicious of the anti-fascist credibility and political motives of the Allied cause, Algren was deeply ambivalent about the war and his own service in it: “I wasn’t ever sure that there wasn’t an overlapping in what we stood for in fighting Hitler and, of course, this kind of doubt was felt much more keenly by the Negro, by Negro troops” (Donohue 71, 70). In other words, Algren suspected that fascism and American capitalism weren’t far removed, an “overlapping” demonstrated here by the racial segregation of the U.S. military and by America’s own fascist social system, Jim Crow. Understanding Algren’s ambivalence—and his resulting identification with a critical understanding of the war voiced by the African-American left—requires examining the conflicted response of the Communist left to the Second World War. The question of the relation of fascism to capitalism was a central question for the international Communist left in the 1930s and 1940s, and it lay behind the left’s various positions on World War II: was it a war between equivalent imperialist nations, or a war necessitating strategic alliances with capitalist governments in order to defeat a distinct fascist threat?

Substantiating Algren’s ambivalence also requires, as Algren would himself try to do in his fiction of World War II, a comparative recovery of that *other* anti-fascist conflict, the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Algren didn’t volunteer for service in the Spanish Civil War, unlike many American Communists who joined the international Communist movement’s defense of the Spanish Republican government.<sup>5</sup> But the defeat of Republican Spain (abandoned by the major democratic nations, which followed non-interventionist foreign policies) by the combined military might of Spanish, Italian, and German fascism functioned, for Algren, as a critical point of comparison for understanding World War II. “I felt earlier in the war in Spain it was a war with which I really felt more profoundly,” he explained. That war, he felt, “was a war in which a demand for recognition of human dignity was being pitted against an entrenched sense of property” (Donohue 73). He here echoes the verdict on Spain offered by Oscar Hunter, a black Chicago Communist who served in Spain and whom Algren likely knew: “We fought in Spain because it would benefit ordinary human beings everywhere,” Hunter recalled. “[B]y and large it was certainly the most beautiful expression of the

commitment to humanity by ordinary humans that I have ever read about or experienced” (qtd. in Kelley 158, see also 127-8). Algren’s estimation of the Second World War—which conditioned his post-Depression shift in writing the lumpenproletariat—has to be approached in relation to the Communist left’s stances on the war, his position on the earlier war in Spain, and his experiences in Europe during World War II.

Beginning in 1935, in accordance with the global political priorities of the Soviet-based Communist International (Comintern), the American Communist movement adopted a policy line known as the Popular Front. The new line was a sharp break from the Party’s militancy of the early 1930s, in which its primary commitment was the instigation of a proletarian revolution, and in which New Deal reformers, social democrats, reactionaries, and fascists were lumped together as undifferentiated class enemies. Now, the American Communist movement subordinated revolution to the construction of organizational links with other anti-fascist progressives. As a result, the Party more or less entered the liberal mainstream in its social and domestic positions as it exceeded that mainstream in its sharp awareness of the threat posed by international fascism. Adopting patriotic and democratic rhetoric under the slogan “Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism,” the Popular Front Party enjoyed unprecedented popular credibility, allying itself with the New Deal political culture of the 1930s. Party membership increased (and came to include a greater percentage of union workers), and as James G. Ryan argues, the Party, especially through its sympathetic liberal “fellow travelers,” exerted great influence in a range of media and publishing institutions. “Indeed,” Ryan observes, “the party’s popularity [during the Popular Front] is difficult for people born after World War II to comprehend” (100-1).

Yet that credibility came at the cost of revolutionary anti-capitalism and Marxist theoretical acuity, both of which were sacrificed to anti-fascism. In the words of Alan Wald, the Popular Front was “a multiple strategy of preserving the existing socioeconomic-political system against the looming threat of fascism” (*Trinity* xvii).<sup>6</sup> As a result, the Popular Front tended to dilute Marxism by combining it with liberalism. The Marxism of the Party—and the precise coordinates of its political identity—would be blurred for the rest of the 1930s and for most of the Second World War (with the exception of a brief return to pre-Popular Front radicalism in 1939-1941, discussed

below). Communist writer and literary critic Joseph Freeman described this uncertain political identity in memorable terms when he described the Popular Front as “the sweetest bandwagon in all history” in which “you were on the side of all the political angels of the day; you were on the side of the Roosevelt administration, on the side of Labor, the Negroes, the middle classes; on the side of Hitler’s victims, on the side of all the oppressed colonial peoples in the world. In short, this is the only period in all the world’s history when you could be at one and the same time an *ardent revolutionary* and an *arch-conservative* backed by the governments of the United States *and* the Soviet Union” (qtd. in Aaron 270-71). The crises of identification and commitment that Communists often experienced during World War II resulted in part from what Freeman’s rhapsody undeniably implies: the necessary *divergence* of interests rather tenuously collected in the Popular Front’s fragile bandwagon.

The Popular Front policy was abruptly cancelled in August 1939 when the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. The Hitler-Stalin Pact returned Communist policy, for the most part, to pre-1935 radicalism. Now, fascism was no longer to be understood as qualitatively different from social-democratic capitalism. The impending conflict between democratic and fascist nations was understood as an “imperialist war” in which the international proletariat had no political investment and which, furthermore, was being waged *against* their class interests.<sup>7</sup> On the domestic front it meant, in Maurice Isserman’s words, that “socialism and revolution were once again practical questions of the day” (41). The Communist movement was now anti-war, anti-capitalist, and anti-Roosevelt in its position, and agitation in the economic sphere was no longer subordinated to the need to prepare the United States for war with fascism. Hence, the Communists backed strikes in defense industry plants, re-prioritizing the class struggle (Isserman 80-82, 87-100). The “sweetest bandwagon in all history” had fractured, as the pact revealed that shifts in the global political conjuncture could make the interests of its members politically irreconcilable. Not surprisingly, the Party’s prioritizing of the interests of Soviet Russia meant that the Hitler-Stalin Pact shattered its mainstream credibility in the U.S. and alienated many of its liberal supporters. The Party was persecuted by the federal government, barred from many electoral ballots in 1940, and purged from various public institutions. The Smith Act, passed by the federal

government in 1940, effectively criminalized membership in the Communist Party on the grounds that such membership constituted agreement with the seditious position that the U.S. state should be overthrown by revolutionary force (Isserman 67-74).

When Germany invaded Russia in June 1941, the Communist line returned to the anti-fascist Popular Front. The American Communist Party's support of the war—and for Roosevelt—was total and trumped all other sociopolitical concerns. The Party condemned strikes in major industries, backing a “no-strike pledge” for the duration of the war. The Party's policy of not criticizing the Roosevelt government meant that it remained silent on the internment of Japanese Americans, the major totalitarian act of the American state. The Party opposed the “Double V” campaign that was popular on the African-American left, with its call for a double victory against fascism abroad *and* racist and Jim Crow practices at home. The Party also supported the government's persecution of the anti-war Trotskyist left under the Smith Act (Wald, *New York* 195-196; Isserman 134-145). Ultimately, in 1944, the Party dissolved itself and reformed as the Communist Political Association, believing that Soviet-American cooperation would continue after the war and that the political place of Communists was within American liberalism. The Communists thus institutionalized their identification with the American state, anticipating a postwar new world order that, in the words of Communist leader Earl Browder, would be marked by the “peaceful coexistence and collaboration” of capitalism and socialism (qtd. in Isserman 188; see also 184-193). Frank Warren writes, “[t]he Communist support of clamping down on opponents was prompted by an undifferentiated desire both to curb any right-wing opposition to Roosevelt and the war and to curb any left opponents” (xix). As Warren's study *Noble Abstractions: American Liberal Intellectuals and World War II* shows, the Party's uncritical support for the war and the U.S. government placed it to the right of liberal intellectuals (those in the orbits of journals like the *New Republic*, the *Nation*, and *PM*) and the (admittedly minor) Socialist Party.

The revisionism of the Communists in this period would later be repudiated by Moscow and by more radical leaders in the American movement. The postwar era would see the rapid reinstatement of the Party and a return to radical anti-capitalism even as the Communist left was soon effectively repressed following 1945. But during the war the

identification of Marxist theory and analysis with the institutional leadership of the Communist Party was, for a radical like Algren, shattered. Browder's declaration toward the end of the war that the duty of the Communists was to "help to remove from the American ruling class the fear of a socialist revolution in the United States in the post-war period" (Isserman 186) signaled the need for committed Marxists to reclaim *Marxism* from the Party. Writers and intellectuals whose approach to Marxism was formed under the auspices of the Party in the 1930s now needed to make their own way in figuring out epistemological gains and political identities in a complex new configuration of global capitalism.

Although Algren's ties to the Party both predated and outlived the Popular Front, he claimed to have been especially energized by international Communism's active struggle against fascism in Germany and especially in the Spanish Civil War: "the reason I was associated so closely with the Communists here was because the Communists in Germany and the Communists in Spain were of a breed that I admired very much. I mean, they were real revolutionaries." This admiration extended to American Communists who fought in Spain: "They went there, they got killed. The Italians and the Germans and the Moors killed them. And they believed in what they were doing, that there was a way of stopping Fascism." Often impatient with the obfuscating rhetoric and changing lines of the American Party, he nonetheless remembered admiring "the individual American who believed strongly enough in the threat of Fascism to fight it personally." In the same interview, however, he also claims to have been disenchanted with the Communist Party during the Spanish Civil War. What he means is unclear (Algren was never very careful about being precise in outlining his background and opinions), since he does specify that his "disenchantment was not an ideological one." Unfortunately, his interviewer H.E.F. Donohue doesn't pursue this line of inquiry (Donohue 88-9, 86-7). Whatever it was that he would later identify as a catalyst of some form of disidentification from the Party, it was at least not rooted in an objection to the fundamentals of the Communist position of the 1930s.

I propose, therefore, to read his disappointment over the Spanish Civil War as the psychological registering of a shift in Algren's literary problematic of which he was unable to be fully conscious: hence he would describe it, decades later, as a

“disenchantment.” The disappointment of Spain made him unable to fully support the cause of the Western democracies against fascism in World War II. Yet it also seems to have suggested to Algren the political limitations of official, orthodox Communist discourse. His explanation to Donohue suggests that admiration for the martyrs of the anti-fascist cause was co-extensive with the germinating suspicion that institutional Communism was inadequate to the political demands of the social and global conjuncture. The traces of this shift in Algren’s literary problematic are visible in his post-1930s work. I want to be clear, however, that this shift does *not* entail, on Algren’s part, a de-radicalization or a turn to anti-Communism (in fact, Algren would be more or less loyal to the Party’s line for much of the postwar era). But he seems to have *never got past Spain*, by which I mean that his post-1930s work uses figurations of 1930s militant anti-fascist leftism, allegorically conjuring up the “spirit” of the red 1930s in moments historically and socially differentiated from that of the Depression. These literary reconstructions of the aura of the 1930s—Spain, anti-fascism, the Popular Front, interracial Communist activism—are means through which he seeks to identify the need for politically-effective social theory. It’s as if during the period of the Spanish Civil War Algren realized a distinction between the institutional apparatus of the Communist Party and the innovative literary-theoretical practice of Marxism. The defeat of the Spanish cause in 1939 “froze” the union of the Communist Party and Marxist theory, for Algren, in the 1930s. Marxism in later conjunctures would no longer be identical with (though it might intersect, parallel, or dialogue with) the official orthodoxy of the Party, and Algren’s work would have to respond accordingly.

Hence, after the 1930s Algren would appropriate the mandate of Marxism—the production of conjuncture-specific knowledge—for his own prerogative as a writer. Algren’s post-Depression writing undertakes the work of Marxist literary practice in part through figuring the 1930s as a complex trope for active, passionate, and inventive sociopolitical commitment. This is how we can best understand his later tendencies, outside of his literary work, to disavow nostalgia for the 1930s while at the same time producing literature that reconstructed and resituated the spirit and critical energies of the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> The 1930s could neither be uncritically returned to (nostalgia), nor cynically rejected (de-radicalization), but had to be *refigured*. This practical orientation allowed

Algren to not only position himself on the margins of orthodox Communist discourse but to imagine sites of marginality and difference in a postwar era marked by national ideological universality and conformity. In Algren's post-1930s work, the Spanish Civil War became a deconstructive-analytical presence to be deployed against mystified understandings of World War II, and the spirit of 1930s Communist radicalism became a figurative mechanism through which to comprehend and challenge the domestic Cold War social structure.

This new project leads Algren to figures of racial blackness and the interracialist activism that marked the Communist movement during the 1930s. Communism was associated, in *Somebody in Boots*, with Dill Doak and with African Americans and thus, in its black and interracial embodiments, proved cognitively inaccessible to Cass McKay. African Americans remain, in Algren's postwar work, figures of sociopolitical potentiality with the difference that that potentiality is now positioned *outside* the official auspices of Communism. While the Communist movement enthusiastically supported World War II as an anti-fascist crusade, Algren felt himself drawn, as discussed above, to the "doubt . . . felt much more keenly by the Negro." What Alan Wald has called "the agony of the African-American left" consisted of its conflicted response to the war. On the one hand, fascism was acknowledged as a threatening, racist order which needed to be suppressed. But anti-fascism had moved the Communist Party—the most important leftist vehicle for African-American politics during the 1930s—away from domestic anti-racist agitation, from advocating for the independence of colonial nations like India, and from revolutionary politics more generally (Wald, *Trinity* 46-49, 63). The admiration many on the African-American left felt for Russia conflicted with the suspicion that the interests of African Americans would always be subordinated by the Party to the foreign policy of the Soviets.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the reality of military segregation inescapably ironized the anti-fascist motives of the American war effort. The African-American left thus often occupied theoretical ground beyond the narrowing epistemological and political limits of Communism, where a more complex and adequate parsing of this new sociopolitical conjuncture could be formulated.

Such thinking from the margins of Communist discourse would characterize Algren's (and Ellison's) literary practice in the postwar period. From embodying the

orthodox Communist problematic in the 1930s, the post-Depression figure of the African American becomes the native informant, the deconstructing outsider, and the *lumpenproletarian* destabilization of the binaric teleology of class conflict (a destabilization now welcomed by Algren as porous to political potential). It allows Algren to put to work a complex and intricate system of figurative relationality between blackness, interraciality, political radicalism, Marxist theoretical development, and utopian possibility.

In 1913, W.E.B. Du Bois had critiqued the Socialist Party on the grounds that it sidelined the “Negro problem.” For Du Bois, this foreclosure subjected the Socialists’ entire political program to a skeptical analysis: “I have come to believe,” Du Bois wrote, “that the test of any great movement toward social reform is the Excluded Class. Who is it that Reform does *not* propose to benefit?” (579). In a time when the Communist movement made stark decisions about which elements of the Popular Front bandwagon would have their material interests prioritized, the site of negativity (the discards, discontents, options, chances, and potentials exteriorized and marginalized—in other words, the lumpen) with respect to the Communist position would be the raw material or blank paper for the production of new and further possibilities. During World War II, African Americans embodied, for Algren, that productive exteriority to hegemonic-nationalist and Communist understandings of the war.

### **Deconstructing the Good War**

Algren’s 1947 collection *The Neon Wilderness* was his first major post-World War II work, comprised of previously published stories and new pieces composed for the volume. The stories vary in setting and thematic concern. Many of the stories reflect a disenchanting, quasi-Existentialist outlook that was commented upon in contemporary reviews (Drew 174). Algren’s characters are generally down-and-out lumpenproletarians who struggle against material limitations, psychological alienation, and a vaguely defeatist conviction of the absurdity of modern urban life. Five stories constitute Algren’s only extended depiction of military experience in the Second World War, and two of them particularly—“Pero Venceremos” and “He Couldn’t Boogie-Woogie Worth a Damn”—reflect the development of new ways of figuring the lumpenproletariat. Thus,

when Martha Heasley Cox and Wayne Chatterton dismiss these stories as Algren's "army stories" that are "not among his best" because their characters "seldom achieve the keenness of Algren's dope addicts, jailbirds, and prize fighters," they fail to see the generation of the literary practice, in these stories of army life, that would produce those later characters (54).

"That's the Way it's Always Been" and "The Heroes" participate in the thematic political paradigm that Morris Dickstein has identified in 1940s and 1950s World War II fictions like Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and James Jones's *From Here to Eternity* (1951). These stories depict the U.S. army as an authoritarian structure, with officers who resemble fascist despots, exploitative capitalists, and corrupted politicians; and with enlisted men standing in for the oppressed masses. These stories, like the novels by Mailer and Jones, seek to preserve social-protest themes from the 1930s as they figure the army as an institutional site of the conformity and domination that left-wing writers saw as typifying postwar American society (Dickstein 29-30). By reworking the military hierarchy as an allegory of capitalist class conflict, these stories demystify the notion of the Second World War as a "good war" or anti-fascist crusade. As the protagonist of "The Heroes," a rank and file G.I., observes: "there were so many more immediate dangers, from our own buddies, that the Kraut stuff always seemed sort of remote. . . . Our war was with the second lieutenants, the MPs, and the cooks" (266-7). The ruling-class officers of "That's the Way it's Always Been" "couldn't get interested in the war" because "[t]hey didn't know what it was all about and they didn't want to learn. All they were aware of was rank, whisky, women, grub, and gossip" (197).

"No Man's Laughter" supplements this paradigm by supplanting a focus on the "proletarian" enlisted men with a consideration of the "lumpenproletarian" army outsider, the figure who symptomatically denies not only that the military is a heroic collective body, but that it has any internally-distinct collectivities at all. Protagonist Gino Bomagino, a car thief and perpetual arrestee, is drafted into the army but finds its power structures no less marginalizing and alienating than those of the American inner city: "He was never able to bring himself to salute as though he meant it; he made each salute smack faintly of nose-thumbing." Combative and quick to be offended, Gino is frequently disciplined but "[a] stretch in the stockade only set him brooding on his

wrongs, and served to convince him that, even here, he must remain forever on the outside of everything except the nearest brig” (226). As in the previous stories, Algren critiques the U.S. war effort by delineating the continuities between the military and capitalist structures of inequity and domination. There is a way out of these structures of determination, for Gino, but it is a heavily ironic one. As skilled in piloting military aircraft as he had been in eluding the cops in stolen cars (another point of continuity between repressive urban power structures and the “good war” military), Gino eventually commits suicide by crash-diving into a Japanese warship. Imagined by him as a blow against all the forces that have delimited and determined him, his suicide is recoded in military lore as a heroic self-sacrifice. Hence, an act subjectively undertaken as resistance and individual transcendence serves objectively to reproduce the ideological precepts and material arrangements against which it was directed. Even when Gino places himself quite literally “outside of everything,” his act reaffirms the positivities it seeks to negate. The political potential of marginality is simultaneously invoked and cancelled, recalling the problematic of the lumpenproletariat that produced the poetics of *Somebody in Boots*.

### **Practically Out of Bounds and Playing in the Dark: “He Couldn’t Boogie-Woogie Worth a Damn”**

Algren revalues social marginality in “He Couldn’t Boogie-Woogie Worth a Damn,” a story drawn from his experience at the end of the war. Following V-E Day, Algren’s hospital unit was re-assigned to the German occupation force, but due to his age, Algren was allowed to return home. While waiting for passage back to America, Algren spent three months in Marseilles that, in the words of his biographer, “were the most isolating and least despairing he’d ever known.” Free from military regimentation, he spent his time gambling, selling American goods on the black market, and visiting prostitutes. It was a personal immersion in a dynamic and active marginality: “I *practically* lived out of bounds,” he later recalled (Drew 166-8; Donohue 83, emphasis added). Out of the experience came one of his most intricately-crafted texts, an effort to figuratively capture the *practical*, productive potential of life at the margins of society. Algren’s time in Marseilles seems to have impressed upon him the possibility that the

non-place of the social outsider can be a site where the excluded can create *new* political identities, can recoup exteriority as freedom.

“Boogie-Woogie” is based on Algren’s time in Marseilles, but the story’s protagonist, Isaac Newton Bailey, is an African-American G.I. who, after going A.W.O.L. from the U.S. Army at the end of the war, hides out in Marseilles and survives by trading on the city’s underworld black market. The story is remarkable both for its interrelated formal and theoretical sophistication and for its surprising move of reworking Algren’s own experiences as those of an African-American alienated from the equally-segregated and racist American military and nation, and seeking a new place of belonging. Within the context of the literary left, this move is not unusual. Alan Wald has argued that in the postwar era there existed “[a] veritable tradition of white radicals creating African-American protagonists to dramatize their views and concerns.” Generally, these writers were (like Algren) male and Jewish-American, and they “created non-white characters as the major spokespersons to explain and dramatize the themes of counter-hegemonic culture.” What Wald terms “cultural cross-dressing” is a literary tendency requiring differential evaluation: “the experience of white radicals representing people of color under Cold War pressure reveals a varying range of strategies and degrees of consciousness” (*Writing* 152, 153, 156).

Yet such “cross-dressing” can easily become a silencing appropriation, a voiding of the specific concerns and interests of African Americans through a transformation of blackness into a mere figure. Algren’s story must be submitted, then, to the sort of critical examination that Toni Morrison calls for in her 1992 essay *Playing in the Dark*: an investigation of the “imaginative uses” of “a nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona” in the work of nonblack American writers. What Morrison calls “playing in the dark” is a multivalent literary strategy, and she asks us to comprehend the various ways in which white writers play in and with the “denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify.” But for Morrison, this is not necessarily an accusative project: she is not out to condemn all white-authored representations of blackness as simply exploitative or racist in intent. Rather, she presents this as an *epistemological* agenda, a call to “examine the impact of notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability and availability on nonblacks who

held, resisted, explored, or altered those notions” (*Playing* 6-7, 11). Or as she writes elsewhere of this critical project: “The point is to clarify, not to enlist,” to understand instead of or before rendering political and aesthetic judgment (“Unspeakable” 384).

My reading of “Boogie-Woogie” seeks to demonstrate the emancipatory and revolutionary role that “playing in the dark,” as a specifically literary mode of theoretical work, can accomplish. I also show how it can lead the revolutionary imagination into some unexpected traps. I use Morrison’s term both in the sense intended by her (a formal principle of the story’s representational agenda), but also to name the political thought performed in the story by the protagonist, who under the cover of darkness in Marseilles will exploit the exchange logic of the black market to imagine new modes of international collectivity and diasporic exchange among the global dispossessed in the wake of World War II. The ambivalence of the African-American experience in World War II not only serves as a theme of the story but explicates Algren’s decision to rethink Marxism through the experiences of an African-American deserter. The use of an African-American protagonist, for Algren, is determined by historically-contingent factors, and it testifies to his sensitive and keen awareness of African-American experience rather than to an investment in any essentialized notion of blackness. As I’ll demonstrate, figurative blackness in “Boogie-Woogie”—as invoked both by the racial identity of its protagonist and the illicit lumpen world of the *black* market—is a figure for the constructed nature and attendant malleability of subjective identity itself, a malleability that enables the imagination of new, inclusive social and political identities rather than the reification of stock stereotypes. For this Jewish-American radical writer navigating the consequences of the Second World War, blackness signifies not essential resistance or any other measure of authentic (fetishized) racial otherness, but the interlocking of political critique, theoretical questioning, and the imagination of new possibilities.

When H.E.F. Donohue asked Algren if he’d written any stories about his army service, he erroneously answered that he “wrote one short story about the black market. . . . It was called ‘He Couldn’t Boogie-Woogie Worth a Damn.’ A very bad title. It was not a satisfactory story” (Donohue 90). Algren isn’t very reliable here, mischaracterizing the frequency and sophistication of his engagement with this subject matter, both in *The Neon Wilderness* and the later *The Man with the Golden Arm*. However, Algren’s answer

contains the seeds of a more important truth: he remembers this story not as a “short story about the army” but as a “short story about the black market.” Couched within his mischaracterization of the story’s quality is a gesture toward the black market as the story’s true organizing theme and trope. The form of his response thus emulates the story itself, for as I demonstrate below, the production of truth *through* untruth is the strange yet compelling epistemological mechanism of “Boogie-Woogie.” The lie that advances a truth, variously conceived, is the generative device of Algren’s work. It is the means through which he realizes the capacities of *fiction* to give rise to theoretical *knowledge*, the trope by which he advocates for the truth of utopia by appropriating and subverting the deceptions of capitalism.

In “Boogie-Woogie,” Isaac Newton Bailey is an African-American soldier from Memphis who has gone A.W.O.L. while stationed in Marseilles at the end of the war. He is hiding out from the military police, waiting until his unit ships back to the States before he himself attempts to return. He lives with an Algerian prostitute named Michele, uses his G.I. uniform and a fake identification to buy army-issued goods and sell them on the black market, and tries to avoid the military police. His existence is determined by logics of exchange. In the very first paragraph, we learn the reason he must hazard capture on the streets of Marseilles: Michele “would bring him *pizza* and wine from the shop downstairs. . . . But with him in the room she had no means of bringing other soldiers there, and the *pizza* and wine cost many francs” (91). With this opening, Bailey’s precarious lifestyle is aligned with the story itself: both are products of the necessities of illicit exchange. The underworld economy of prostitution and the black market generate narrative—they allow something to happen. Thus Algren introduces the formal genesis of the story’s figurative project as deriving *out of* the very dynamics of lumpen practices. The opening paragraph signals the *productive* socioeconomic marginality of the lumpenproletariat.

Bailey’s social identity is destabilized from the beginning, and that destabilization is implicated with the black market. In order to buy goods at the army supply store to sell for a profit on the black market, Bailey must don his uniform to present himself in public as another, non-A.W.O.L. soldier. As he does so, Michele “kissed him on each cheek as though she were de Gaulle, and he kissed her on the mouth as though he were exactly

what he was: Pfc Isaac Newton Bailey, U.S. Army, unattached, unassigned, and whereabouts unknown” (91). The simile equates the social presentation of identity with the essence of identity, transposing a logic of exchangeability onto subjectivity. For Bailey, even “what he was” falls under the “as though” of figuration, its capacity to make metaphoric exchanges between objects. From a displaced, out-of-bounds location—“unattached, unassigned, and whereabouts unknown”—Bailey and Michele collectively construct an inessential, socially-useful identity for Bailey. When Bailey puts on his uniform (which both identifies and anonymizes him, enabling him to enter the army store), he re-figures himself. The ritual described here is a parody of subjective interpellation, since if de Gaulle honoring a soldier interpellates that individual as an ideological subject (a heroic fighter in the anti-fascist cause, savior of democratic Europe, etc.), Michele’s performance of de Gaulle allows her and Bailey to (re)produce him (temporarily) as a new subversive subject, a soldier who is going to appropriate military identity for his own needs. This is not a masking, but an actual refashioning, since Bailey is not given an essential self that exists prior to his marginal social position and furtive underworld activities. Even his name, “Isaac Newton Bailey,” is nothing but an obvious literary artifice that evokes laws of movement—and working the black market requires him to be always on the move.

With this scene, Algren advances two important theses. The first is that subjectivity is a product of social function rather than its precondition. However, Algren also suggests that the nature of subjectivity as a social product rather than an ontological essence necessarily entails some measure of malleability in subjectivity. He discovers the *identity of subjective identity and social position or function*, a key theoretical postulate of Louis Althusser. The subject, Althusser holds, is the site within which the ideological naturalization of the social structure is ensured. Subjectivity achieves the function of ideology, which is to present social relations as given and “obvious” to the perspective of the subject. Algren, rather than conceiving this condition as a block to epistemological and political possibility, finds possibility within it by subversively appropriating the mechanisms of subject formation.<sup>10</sup> This linking of exchange, subjectivity, and figurative potential is the governing problematic of “Boogie-Woogie.”

On the day the story is set, Bailey's "main business" is to get a dress for Michele. The dress is an object of economic necessity for Michele's trade, but "you couldn't even buy a decent scarf for under a thousand francs." So he will turn to crime and to the black market: "down by the docks overcoats were piled up to the rafters in the supply depots. They were worth five thousand francs each on the market—the price of a dress" (95). These are the illegal, out of bounds measures to which the lumpen, by reason of their material lack and social marginalization, must resort. Yet the illegal exchanges of the black market provide a grounding logic for other "illegal" *imaginative* (and hence "out of bounds") exchanges.

As Bailey moves about Marseilles, he witnesses American troops acting as colonial oppressors. He sees them making an old drunken Frenchman dance for their entertainment, and heckling and abusing a helpless prostitute in the Bar Odéon (94-5). The spectacle of the Frenchman especially depresses him and convinces him that "he'd never feel homesick for Memphis again," where like the Frenchman he can be little more than a performer for the gratification of white Americans. But Bailey's situation is also reflected in the predicament of the prostitute, who is teasingly welcomed and then denigrated by the G.I.s until she doesn't know "whether to laugh with them or be insulted, to sit down with them or go far away." Such confusion works as an account of both the double bind Bailey faces in being African and American, and his ambivalence about going back to Memphis. Can he belong in a Jim Crow social system? Should he "sit down" in America with his oppressors, or is his home somewhere else, somewhere "far away"? Bailey will thus start reconsidering his own identity, and his own proper social home, by imaginatively reaching out toward others beyond the bounds of race and nation.

As darkness falls, he enters the nighttime world of Marseilles, where he will engage in his own sort of "playing in the dark." "Bailey saw the first lights of the night coming on along the boulevard, and with their coming the eager, seeking, searching faces of the wandering sidewalk thousands became anxious, pallid, and fearful," the narrator explains. "Along the bars and down the alleys, beside the docks and in the shadowed corners of these ancestral streets, he was haunted by these Mediterranean faces" (95-6). As philosopher Jacques Rancière and historian Bryan Palmer have shown, the night can

be liberating for capitalism's oppressed, since it offers free time away from the power relations of the working day—social, cultural, and political production can and has taken place in the dark of the night.<sup>11</sup> Bailey similarly takes advantage of the night to imagine political alternatives. During the day, he is only sickened by the actions of the G.I.s, “wondering whether it was himself or the soldiers with whom there was something missing” (95). He had gone to see a film, and it “turned out to be *GI Joe*, and halfway through he knew he was going to be sick and got out just in time” (93). But now, by imagining that the faces of passers-by become, at night, reflections of his own fear and anxiety, Bailey seeks solidarity with the occupied men and women of Marseilles:

A thousand years of lust and poverty and war and the degradation of war. He saw not only the women whose men had died in Italy and Africa and Germany and Spain: it was also for those who had fallen before Syracuse and Rome; for the thousand forgotten campaigns in which they, the people of the narrow places, had always, and would always be, the everlasting losers. (96)

Bailey imagines the faces he encounters on the sidewalk as those of the lumpenproletariat of Marseilles, those non-class outsiders who haunt the city's bars, alleys, and “shadowed corners.” These faces then become the “people of the narrow places,” a transhistorical symbolic identity, the collectivity of all marginalized and victimized peoples, the “everlasting losers.” The face of Marseilles, he goes on to imagine, is “the composite face of all humanity,” an imaginary yet inclusive community in which he could fully belong. He goes on to note that Marseilles “was also a workers' city.” But the workers he has in mind are not the laboring proletarians of *The Communist Manifesto*. Rather, Marseilles is “a dirty dockside mechanic sprawling, in a drunken sleep, his feet trailing the littered sea.” Bailey figures Marseilles as a worker who, like himself, is outside the economic relations of the capitalist working day and thus capable of enjoying and exploiting that night-time freedom. Momentarily breaking from this reverie to observe his surroundings again, Bailey notes that “everything had the gaunt and shrouded look of dead Egypt.” But this architectural commentary moves him back into the register of the imaginary: “whenever he heard the great sea bell he felt it must have tolled so when Egyptian legions held this shore: to those mercenaries, he realized, the lion-colored hills of Africa must have looked like home.” Bailey then begins “fancying himself just such a soldier, of such a time: only the uniform had changed. The allegiance had been no stronger then than

now. It had always been somebody else's war, so everything was really the same" (96-7). This assertion is how Bailey justifies his flights of imagination: despite the real differences between Bailey and the people of Marseilles (as he imagines them), and Bailey and these Egyptian legionnaires, all are equally exchangeable since they share the essential experience of being the victims of somebody's else's war, the means of somebody else's profit.

While the historical identity of these "Egyptian legions" is not specified, it seems likely that Algren had Napoleon's Mamluk mercenaries in mind. Following the defeat of Napoleon's Egyptian campaign in 1800, a Mamluk mercenary squadron, partially recruited in Egypt, was organized in France to serve in Napoleon's military. After Waterloo, the Mamluk squadron was stationed in Marseilles, where it fell victim to the "White Terror," a royalist uprising against Napoleonic rule. When the royalists captured Marseilles, what Edmund Burke III describes as a "lynch mob" attacked the Mamluks, killing twelve and wounding several more (Burke 137-9, McGregor 49-50). The term Mamluk refers to a powerful caste in Muslim societies—particularly Egypt—descended from slaves pressed into military service. However, Napoleon's squadron was "Mamluk" in name only. It was so named because it was uniformed in the style of Mamluk troops: according to Andrew James McGregor, "[t]heir magnificent uniforms made them the showpiece of an already gaudy army" (50). The unit was in fact composed of a range of Middle Eastern ethnic and religious groups: Muslims from Egypt and Syria, Christians from Greece, Armenia, and other sites, as well as Sudanese and North Africans. By the end of Napoleon's reign, European troops had been recruited to fill the ranks of the squadron, making it, in Burke's phrase, "a kind of mini-Foreign Legion" (137). Concerned about his return to the U.S. as a black soldier no longer of use to a racist nation, Bailey's identification with the Mamluks is at once politicized and poignant, a yearning for collective belonging so strong that it crosses national, cultural, and temporal borders. The unit's fate, and its diverse composition, make it a sign of international collectivity among the oppressed and the exploited.<sup>12</sup>

Bailey's night-time reveries thus contain a remarkable series of imaginative transactions across all kinds of epistemological boundaries, transactions enabled by the freedom of night as a time of cognitive fluidity removed from the sharp distinctions of

daylight. Of course, these transactions could be said to be ideological: they pose a universalism that is at least partially false, obscuring (as universalisms always do) material and historical differences between the African-American G.I. and the Mamluk mercenary, between World War II and past conflicts. But the content of that universalism—what enables these identities and events to be exchanged in Bailey’s imagination—is the historical persistence of class conflict, a reality that takes various historical and social forms but is essentially “the same.” Bailey’s fantasies are at once ideological *and* epistemological, false *and* true. By making gestures of imaginative solidarity toward the Mamluks, the desperate women of Marseilles, the casualties of World War II and the wars of antiquity, the drunken dancing Frenchman, and the harassed prostitute, Bailey defines a collective identity for the “losers” of all wars, an identity that verges on the transracial, transnational, and even transhistorical inclusiveness of humanity itself. In the immediate context of World War II, these losers are not the Nazis, but all those who were duped into fighting and suffering in order to establish an American global hegemony to which they are now subject, as the people of Marseilles are to the bullying G.I.s, or as Bailey is to the military police. Through these transactions, Bailey enacts the cognitive work Algren called “doing it the hard way,” or imagining the vibrant political energy of the socially marginal.

That imaginary collective identity is finalized after Bailey makes a black market exchange with a Moroccan. As part of the bargain, the Moroccan suggests that Bailey throw in his own pants for ten dollars. Bailey rejects the offer but then reflects on it: “he realized, abruptly, how much safer he’d be in the other’s clothes. . . . He laughed to think of how Michele would greet him in such an outfit. Hell, Bailey thought disgustedly, I’d be her countryman then for sure. If he was he might as well go back to Algiers with her.” But the act of dismissing this outcome forces him to consider it fully as an option. “And what, he asked himself abruptly, did he have to go back to Memphis for anyhow? He couldn’t sing, he wasn’t a pug, he wouldn’t shine shoes, and he couldn’t boogie-woogie worth a damn. He couldn’t play an instrument, he never clowned, and making up berths for the Pullman Company had the same warm appeal for him as shining shoes.” The conviction that Memphis is his natural home, he suspects, is an ideological one, only formed without question “because everybody else had always been moaning for home”

(98-9). The black market incident offers for Bailey's consideration the constructed and therefore malleable nature of identity: his clothes do, to an extent, "make" him, just like the array of Middle Eastern and European soldiers serving in the French Mamluk unit are made "Mamluks" by their uniform alone. He can exchange his national identity as one exchanges any product on the black market: secretly, illicitly, and for his personal profit. If subjectivity is not essential but open to interpellation and (re)production, then identificatory transactions and collective alliances can be made as easily as changing clothes.

In this story, the "black market" has unavoidable racial significances as well, and in this scene with the Moroccan, it resembles a black cultural diaspora, an international collectivity, internally differentiated, with possible paths of exchange across variant sites. The exchange prompts Bailey to imagine Algeria as a possibly true "home" and community for the black subject. According to Brent Hayes Edwards, diaspora is a similar practice of articulating points of international contact *across* the differences separating sites and peoples, forming "non-naturalizable patterns of linkage between disparate societal elements" (11). Less a stable empirical object than a contingent articulation of international identity, Edwards's practice of diaspora resembles Bailey's practice of imagination, the links and equivalences he envisions *in spite of* the real differences between African-American G.I.s and Algerians.<sup>13</sup>

But as we've seen, membership in Bailey's international "black market" is not conceived by him in narrowly nationalistic or racial terms. His expansive re-interpellation is a practice of diasporic linkage with any and all victims of American imperialism. The uniform of Napoleon's Mamluks—an empty signifier that cements a cross-racial and cross-national collectivity—is the figure Marseilles's history offers for that articulation of collective identity. The Mamluk uniform is the uniform of an imaginary anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist community in which Bailey can imagine himself at home. Although he doesn't literally exchange any clothes, Bailey's ultimate figurative transaction in the story is to trade the anonymous uniform of the American G.I. for the colorful, expressive uniform of the international Mamluk.

Doing so requires a feat of subjective reinvention. Under cover of night, Bailey breaks into the supply depot and steals an overcoat, which he sells on the black market to

a purchaser whom Algren names after his role in the exchange process. “[A] spare, wispy little middle-aged Frenchie came and sat innocently beside him and whispered ‘*Combien?*’ For five thousand francs, Bailey assured him with gestures, his overcoat was a bargain. *Combien* rose and led him a quarter of a mile toward a bombed-out building. They would meet there in half an hour, it was agreed, Bailey with the coat and he with the francs” (100). Algren connects the ideological nature of subjectivity to the functioning of the market, where, according to Marx, relations between commodities (to be precise, between their exchange values) supplant human relations. Algren understands the commodity fetish as supplanting *any* essentialist notion of subjective identity. The identificatory (mis)recognitions involved in the ideological interpellation of a subject—the “who” a subject thinks itself to really be—function to ensure the survival of a mode of production in which individuals are in fact immanent to that mode’s processes of production and exchange. But because we (mis)recognize ourselves as “us,” we generally don’t see this—we’re too caught up in ourselves to see the constructed, functional nature of ourselves. By naming the Frenchman *Combien*, Algren defamiliarizes subjectivity and points out the reality concealed by interpellation. Subjects are really socioeconomic functions, Algren indicates, and qualitative subjective identity is inessential and always-already articulated. Surprisingly, Algren sees the socioeconomic construction of subjectivity as a source of possibility: identity is artifice, and it can be reworked and redefined in generative ways.

Of course, this is not how we conventionally think about the relation between the subject and politics. We assume it is the reality, the essential authenticity, of certain subjective identities that enables them to be politically effective in challenging their ideological devaluation or legal disenfranchisement. Hence, we might well be skeptical at the story’s resolution, in which Bailey returns to Michele’s room (after escaping capture by the military police) and they decide to move together to Algeria. “You will be my Algérien,” she tells him. The story ends with Bailey hearing a mystical interpellative call from Africa, from the “lion-colored hills of home” (103). To grasp this ending, and to see how it energizes the political potential of subjectivity as always-already fictional, we need to see how Algren has reworked Marx’s theory of the commodity fetish. Algren’s story posits that subjectivities are malleable and interchangeable because their “value” is,

like a commodity's exchange value, inessential: it inheres not in any cultural or biological essence, but is the product of contingent social relations. Marx, of course, understood the exchange value of the commodity to be a denigration of the commodified object's real sensuous essence. In the first chapter of *Capital*, using a coat as an example, he demonstrates how the market-dictated exchangeability of the coat transforms it into a phantasm whose value is defined not in terms of the objectivity of the coat, but in abstract terms of exchangeability with other exchangeable objects. Thus, Peter Stallybrass has argued that Marx's critique of the commodity fetish is not a critique of the fetishization of the materiality of objects, but a critique of the fetishization of their exchange value as commodities, a value that cancels the commodity's materiality and the traces of human labor that created it. "In the place of a coat," writes Stallybrass, "there was a transcendental value that erased both the making and the wearing of the coat. *Capital* was Marx's attempt to give back the coat to its owner" (187).

But the coat that Isaac Newton Bailey steals only has any use for him *as* a product of exchange, precisely *because* he stole rather than made it. He reverses Marx's characterization of the coat as commodity: for Bailey, the trans-identificatory logic of exchange value—any object is exchangeable with any other object—makes possible metaphoric flights of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist identification. These flights are imaginary, like exchange values and like subjectivities. But Marx insists that the logic of exchange value is *also real* to the extent that it is the real logic by which capitalist society objectively functions. Likewise, ideology—the content of subjectivity—for Althusser is real to the extent that it is essential to the functioning of any social order: it is a "necessarily imaginary distortion" ("Ideology" 111, emphasis added). Subjects and commodities are ideological and fictional, yet also real and objective categories. Marx wrote of the "mystery . . . magic and necromancy" of commodities (169), and the imaginary construction of anti-capitalist political options belongs to this same weird order of distorted-yet-functional "realities."<sup>14</sup> Hence, we return to Algren's pun of "lion-colored hills," which suggests the pride and strength of an Africanist identity that is, at the same time, a "lie" ("lion"/"lyin"). It is a lie not only because such an identity would rest on an essentializing claim to authenticity, but because, as the composition of the Mamluk squadron suggests, we should read those "lion-colored hills" not as a real

geographic place so much as a figure for a utopian, post-capitalist and post-imperialist “home.”

Algren thus makes use of an expansive concept of the lie, one that links the transformative work of imagination and figuration to the paradoxical ontology of the commodity posited by Marxism. Bailey’s imaginative efforts have the truth content of a lie, on the one hand, and a productive capacity of their own, on the other. “Lies are a poor man’s pennies,” a character declares in one of the other *Neon Wilderness* stories, capturing their value for the materially disenfranchised (119). In other words, lies aren’t always bad things, and they may even be essential for revolutionary politics. Hannah Arendt argues that the ability to lie—to knowingly deny the facticity of reality—is an “active and aggressive capacity” that enables politics to interject difference into reality and thereby *change* it.

Such change would be impossible if we could not mentally remove ourselves from where we physically are located and *imagine* that things might as well be different from what they actually are. In other words, the deliberate denial of factual truth—the ability to lie—and the capacity to change facts—the ability to act—are interconnected; they owe their existence to the same source: imagination. (5)

Political change requires an ability to think in spite of the facts, to situate oneself beyond the bounds of a repressive reality and to assume, in the face of all indications to the contrary, that things can be otherwise. Arendt clarifies how Algren’s story foregrounds a surprising link between lying (or fiction, or figuration, or imagination) and revolutionary praxis.

As the site of the subversive refiguring of commodity exchangeability, the black market is not just the topic of “Boogie-Woogie” but its organizing formal and theoretical principle. On the story’s black market, the logic of exchange governing the commodity fetish is parodied in the name of anti-market politics. Given that the story figuratively ties this black market to a concept of black diasporic identity, we are unexpectedly able to situate “Boogie-Woogie” in relation to a major account of African-American literature. In his imaginative work, Isaac Newton Bailey more than resembles the Signifying Monkey, the folkloric figure that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has famously described as troping the tropic work of African-American literature. The Monkey is the “figure-of-figures” and his “language of Signifyin(g) functions as a metaphor for formal revision, or

intertextuality, within the Afro-American literary tradition.” Signifyin(g) is a “rhetorical transfer” that, through allusion and parody, “functions to redress an imbalance of power, to clear a space, rhetorically” (xxi, 124). Bailey signifies on the capitalist market, appropriating its logics within a rhetorical “black market” in which they are re-signified as means of resistance. The story’s rhetorical and textual dynamics are helpfully explicated by Gates’s theory, and they also locate “Boogie-Woogie” in proximity to Gates’s definition of African-American expression. If we credit Gates’s identification of the formal and rhetorical identity of the African-American literary tradition, then we can see that “Boogie-Woogie” does not merely motivate a nonblack author’s fetishized construction of blackness as other, or blackness as a white author’s notion of authenticity. Rather, the story emulates the formal structure and project of black expression itself. It still functions by means of cross-racial appropriation, but its careful sensitivity and attention to the racial identity and experience being appropriated sets it apart as a particularly instructive instance of the potentially progressive productivity of playing in the dark.

“Boogie-Woogie,” then, should be read as a self-theorization of Algren’s understanding of radical writing. It departs from any paradigm of committed literature as empirically documenting the dirty realities of oppression, or as celebrating authentic identities that have been unjustly marginalized. Rather, the story tries to imagine something else beyond the bounds of reality. The writer, at his or her most revolutionary, is not a muckraker but a producer of new ideas and options. The radical writer must always get outside of defined ideological and theoretical positions in order to perpetually imagine new ways of surpassing established sociopolitical arrangements. The radical writer must be, in Algren’s formula, “practically out of bounds.” As an African-American deserter, Isaac Newton Bailey is outside the U.S. Army, marginalized in a Jim Crow country, and skeptical of the myth of the war as a straightforward anti-fascist crusade, a myth that is also the official line of the Communist Party. His situation thus encodes Algren’s own doubts about institutional Communism, the American state, and the Allied cause: as a Marxist writer, he now cannot be “at home” in any of the three. Both Bailey and Algren find themselves out of bounds and therefore free to imagine new radicalisms and new internationalisms in which both can be *at home*. The generative lie of this

identification between black lumpen protagonist and white radical writer is grounded on Algren's ability to recognize and give expression to the challenge World War II posed to African Americans' conception of their respective national and international places of belonging, a dilemma articulated decades later by James Baldwin:

The treatment accorded the Negro during the Second World War marks, for me, a turning point in the Negro's relation to America. To put it briefly, and somewhat too simply, a certain hope died, a certain respect for white Americans faded. . . . You must put yourself in the skin of a man who is wearing the uniform of his country, is a candidate for death in its defense, and who is called a "nigger" by his comrades-in-arms and his officers . . . who knows that the white G.I. has informed the Europeans that he is subhuman. . . . And who, at the same time, is far freer in a strange land than he has ever been at home. *Home!* You must consider what happens to this citizen, after all he has endured, when he returns—home: search, in his shoes, for a job, for a place to live; ride, in his skin, on segregated buses; see, with his eyes, the signs saying "White" and "Colored". . . . And all this is happening in the richest and freest country in the world, and in the middle of the twentieth century. (54-5)

Algren's ability to see this dilemma and to enact within literary form the hypothetical experiment Baldwin proposes allows him to get beyond the bounds of the nation, Communist discourse, and orthodox Marxist valuations of the lumpenproletariat and to imagine new modes of collective political radicalism.

Algren plays in the dark in Toni Morrison's sense of the term, but also in the sense that Bailey does, when Bailey imaginatively sutures a sustaining, collective identity under cover of night. We must recall that Bailey rejects Memphis because he couldn't boogie-woogie worth a damn: he rejects what blackness means to a Jim Crow nation. But what blackness can mean on the black market of Marseilles, or with Michele in the lion-colored hills of Africa, is potentially boundless. In "Boogie-Woogie," blackness is real and shapeable, open to consequential fashioning, articulation, and expansion. For Algren, the identity of *any* subject position, racial or otherwise, is like the commodity form: at once real *and* inessential, a fiction that nonetheless matters. This is a cause for hope, since it means that the identities of individual and collective subjects can be (re)produced or (re)written with real results. Algren asks us to see this condition not as a decentering of subjectivity that inhibits political agency, but as grounds for the perpetual imagination of stronger identities, truer homes, and better worlds.

### **(Mis)remembering The Spanish Civil War**

In Algren's postwar work, the figuring of new political identities and options under the expansive license of the "lie" of imagination proceeds by productive (mis)recognition, as we've seen, but also by productive (mis)remembering. As a brief examination of Algren's "Pero Venceremos," a story about the Spanish Civil War, will show, this practice of (mis)remembering the atmosphere and struggles of the radical 1930s (a practice central to *The Man with the Golden Arm*) has its origins in *The Neon Wilderness*. Yet first we must note the paradoxes and political regressions that always potentially attend a literary practice of (mis)recognizing and (mis)remembering, because Algren's comments about the Spanish Civil War bring them to our attention. Consider Algren's explanation to H.E.F. Donohue of why he didn't volunteer to fight in Spain. He tells Donohue that Spain was a unique sort of war. "That is, it had to be won in the way, in the way that the men who went there tried to win it, by the bayonet and the grenade. . . . I didn't go for this reason: Because given a bayonet against a Moor with a bayonet, the Moor was going to win. . . . My defense when asked why aren't you there was that I didn't want to get killed" (73). We have another example here of how Algren's extra-literary pronouncements fail to be adequate to the achievements of his writing. He certainly intends to convince Donohue that he didn't go to Spain because the war (unlike the war depicted in "That's the Way it's Always Been" or "The Heroes") was a *real* anti-fascist war, waged for absolute stakes and with no quarter offered. Algren admits he didn't go because he feared for his life, an admission that also allows Algren, by comparison, to deconstruct the purported anti-fascist commitment of the Allies in World War II. But the unintended racist overtones of his hypothetical example—implying not only that the African mercenaries employed by the fascists were the real proponents of the fascist cause, but that they were naturally predisposed to savage, hand-to-hand combat—are at once unsettling and remarkably at odds with the diasporic, anti-racist, and anti-fascist investments of "Boogie-Woogie." Algren seems to have forgotten the de-essentializing and collectivist yearnings that emerge rather poignantly in that story when Bailey realizes what it means to be a black mercenary in World War II. In other words, Algren doesn't seem to have an eye for the racial complexities of the Spanish Civil War in the same way that he does for those of World War II.<sup>15</sup>

An explanation for Algren's unreliability, however, lies in his otherwise anti-ideological understanding of the two wars: the lessons he drew about the latter war do not, in his mind, apply to the earlier war. If the motives and ideological accountings of World War II are to be deconstructed by reference to Spain, then the Spanish Civil War, for Algren, remains less an historical event than the very inviolate moment of radicalism and anti-fascism. For Algren, Spain is not open to the same sort of deconstructive analyses he applies, in "Boogie-Woogie," to World War II, and his remark about African mercenaries is a lamentable consequence of this distinction. What we should be reminded of here is the fact that symbolic or strategic reappropriations of complex historical events, while opening up possibilities for figuring radical political options, nonetheless carry their own blind spots and traps. Algren's explanation to Donohue is a symptomatic indication of this fact. However, as my reading of "Boogie-Woogie" has hopefully demonstrated, a degree of distinction between history and literature is necessary for the imaginative political capacities of literature. An act of imagination—whether Isaac Newton Bailey's imaginative subjective identifications, or the imaginative links of Brent Hayes Edwards's diaspora, or Hannah Arendt's capacity for lying—entails such blind spots as the precondition of the opportunities it produces. To adequately read such acts requires the critic to grasp that necessity as an enabling dialectic.

The resourcefulness of this (mis)recollection of the Spanish Civil War animates Algren's fifth war story in *The Neon Wilderness*. In "Pero Venceremos," a barfly named Denny O'Connor wearies the narrator with his memories of fighting in the Spanish Civil War. O'Connor tells of being wounded in a bayonet fight with a "Moor" at Sierra La Valls, "a place we called the Pimple." Thus, according to the terms of Algren's confused account of why he himself didn't fight in Spain (an account that reminds us that we have before us a *misrecognition* of Spain), the war is here signaled as authentic in its anti-fascist political motives. To the narrator's exasperation, O'Connor recounts the tale "as though I hadn't heard it all a hundred detailed times in the decade since his return from Spain" (217). The story is set in the late 1940s, and O'Connor has been telling his story, doing the self-representational work of narrativizing his experience, for the decade since 1939. "It wouldn't be so bad if he'd invent a little sometimes as he went along. But it's always the same threadbare routine" (219). His story is *ragged* through constant re-

telling, and the narrator initially mistakes that raggedness as a negation, the fact that should allow him to just ignore O'Connor's ramblings: "no one pays O'Connor attention anymore. O'Connor is O'Connor and we've heard it all before." Furthermore, O'Connor doesn't seem to recall his war experience accurately, and he occasionally misremembers in which shoulder he was wounded (217).

At the end of "Pero Venceremos," the narrator tells O'Connor to forget Spain: "After all, that's a hundred years ago." Certainly he is right: in the changed sociopolitical conditions of America in the late 1940s, the American left and its past involvement with Spain couldn't be more outmoded. But O'Connor lies and denies the historical differences between then and now: "It wasn't even yesterday, the way it feels," he says. "It feels more—like tomorrow" (221). By telling this same "threadbare" narrative, O'Connor keeps alive the spirit of the "red" 1930s and the passion of truly radical anti-fascism, even if he has to paper over and misremember the facts of the historical record to do so. The lumpen character O'Connor, who has been doing nothing but haunting dark bars since the 1930s, offers material for the re-imagining of radicalism to anyone who will listen: "He'd keep on talking awhile," the narrator comments, "to whoever would listen, about that foggy morning at the Pimple" (221). The raggedness of his story is the proof of its enduring relevance: it is a secret history of past political knowledge and options, offered to the writer who will "do it the hard way" and use it to figure *new* modes of theory and politics. Algren would do just that in *The Man with the Golden Arm*, in which an allegorical reconstruction of a certain myth, a certain lie about the authenticity and utopian promise of 1930s radicalism sustains new anti-capitalist literary practices in the Cold War.

What Algren effectively realizes in stories like "Boogie-Woogie" and "Pero Venceremos," and will further implement in *Golden Arm* is that the effectiveness of committed writing lies not in its mimetic reflection of reality, but in its figurative appropriation of reality. As such, his work stands as a literary implementation of Althusser's central epistemological thesis that knowledge is an outcome of practice rather than an "accurate" mimetic reflection: "not *vision* but *production*," to quote Gregory Elliott (81). The committed writer is not a muckraker, but a literary producer of theoretical gains. The break in Algren's approach to the lumpenproletariat is one whose

contours are internal to the literary: that is, his post-1930s fiction does not seek to represent the *actual* lumpenproletariat as an *actual* political subject. Such a project would more than likely lead Algren to a romanticization of social death, home-lessness, and destitution as privileged states of epistemological and political acuity. Rather, what shifts in his practice are the figurative consequences of the lumpen. In *Somebody in Boots*, the lumpenproletariat provided the figures for a working-through of socially-produced cognitive delimitation, an immanent examination of how capitalism stifles individual powers of cognition. The lumpen could ground this project because Algren understood them as orthodox Marxism did, as an absolutely deprived product of social and political processes. Yet in these post-Depression fictional efforts, Algren reapproaches the negativity of the lumpenproletariat, grasping it not as absolute but as productive, and refiguring marginality from a position of lack into a position of opportunity.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> The epistemological break is introduced by Althusser (who borrows it from Gaston Bachelard) in order to distinguish the writings of a “young Marx,” still working within the idealist and ideological problematic of Hegelianism, from those of the “mature Marx,” who works within the material and scientific problematic of Marxism proper. Althusser relies on the concept to de-humanize “Marx,” to deny the humanist assertion that all the texts authored by the subject “Marx” must necessarily form an organic whole. Althusser does not position the moment of the break as final or absolute: rather, the new problematic which emerges from the break must be continually worked out, developed, and refined (*For Marx* 81-86; “Reply to John Lewis” 65-74).

<sup>2</sup> For a lucid and elegant discussion of the potentials and problems of Althusser’s epistemology (and one which has guided my own thinking), see Gregory Elliott’s magisterial *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (55-97). For another informative account of some of these issues, see Alex Callinicos’s *Althusser’s Marxism* (53-60). For Althusser’s own discussion of criteria of scientific adequacy, and his theoretical objections to empiricism, see *Reading Capital* (34-69).

<sup>3</sup> This long essay was composed between 1950 and 1953, but unpublished in Algren’s lifetime. Daniel Simon and C.S. O’Brien recovered the piece from Algren’s archival material, and Seven Stories Press published it in 1996. Doubleday had intended to publish the essay in 1953 but ultimately withdrew due to concerns over the work’s political orientation.

<sup>4</sup> The only comparative moment of which I am aware, in the critical literature on either writer, is Carla Cappetti’s brief observation that both Algren and Ellison used ethnographic field studies they performed while employed by the Federal Writers’ Project as sources for later literary efforts (164-8).

<sup>5</sup> American Communists served in the Spanish Civil War as members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, a unit organized by the American Communist Party (other member parties of the Communist International also fielded volunteer units). The Lincoln Brigade, often ill-equipped, suffered high casualties. The failure of the democratic nations to come to the military or material aid of Republican Spain would cause many Communists to doubt the motives of those same nations in the early stages of the Second World War (Isserman 27-8).

<sup>6</sup> The scholarship on the American left produced within literary studies and history offers a range of opinions on the Popular Front, the wisdom of its political compromises, and the value of its mainstream, liberal, Americanist cast. For an example, one might compare Alan Wald's description of the Popular Front with Michael Denning's effusive reading. For Denning, the Popular Front is not merely a Communist Party policy but a C.I.O.-based "insurgent social movement," a "radical historical bloc uniting industrial unionists, Communists, independent socialists, community activists, and émigré anti-fascists around laborist social democracy, anti-fascism, and anti-lynching." It thus "stands as a central instance of radical insurgency in modern US history" (4). Denning argues that the Popular Front's artistic, intellectual and cultural productions—what he terms the "cultural front"—fundamentally "reshaped American culture" (xvi) in terms of the sociopolitical sensibilities of the radical, ethnic, and class-conscious C.I.O. Historian Maurice Isserman offers a judicious evaluation of the Popular Front, noting its theoretical capitulations and political compromises but also its organizational and strategic successes. He also makes the compelling suggestion that the reality of international fascism, and the fate of the German Communist Party (much stronger and more established than the American Party, but which had nonetheless been quickly wiped out by the Nazis), made the choice between liberal anti-fascism and revolutionary militancy, for American Communists, both stark and urgent (9-12).

<sup>7</sup> For an official articulation of the "imperialist war" thesis, see the 1940 pamphlet by Comintern General Secretary Georgi Dimitroff, "The Struggle Against the Imperialist War." Trotskyists in the United States initially developed similar theses about the war but generally came to support it as an anti-fascist struggle, although more critically than would the Communists after 1941 (Wald, *New York* 193-225).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, in a 1964 letter to the *Carleton Miscellany* he declined to participate in a symposium on the 1930s, claiming "that time is so remote I lost interest in it long ago" (104). In the 1950s, he wrote to Maxwell Geismar that, in his opinion, the major writers of the 1930s had been unable to sustain their careers in any meaningful way. He cited Kenneth Fearing, Richard Wright, and others who either stopped writing after the 1930s or ceased to write anything of merit: "when the thirties were done, they were done." Fearing, he writes, was "the truest poet, for my money, of the decade" but was since "repeating himself. Now he's hacking" (qtd. in Drew 253). It's clear here that Algren associates literary merit with politically-attuned innovation, a point he had made in the 1930s, also with respect to Fearing's poetry, and in more explicit terms. In 1939, in the days of the Popular Front, Algren had criticized Fearing for not adjusting the pre-Popular Front political content of his verse to suit the changed needs of the present: "at times Fearing appears more occupied with the crash of 1929 than with the threat of modern fascism, more concerned with the helplessness of the individual under capitalism than with the collective power of man" ("Fearing's Verse" 7).

<sup>9</sup> For detailed accounts of the appeal of Soviet Russia—on multiple material, discursive, and ideological levels—to the African-American left, see Baldwin and Maxwell.

<sup>10</sup> Althusser's theory of ideology and subjectivity is advanced in his well-known essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation." The potential for subversion that Algren finds in the ideological constitution of subjectivity is in fact suggested by Althusser, despite the oft-made assertion that Althusser's theory cancels any political potential in subjectivity. Subjects, Althusser holds, are interpellated within institutions—discrete sets of relatively autonomous social practices—that he terms "ideological state apparatuses." In general, the function of these institutions is to produce the ideological obviousness of social reality and thus (re)produce its dominant and oppressive social arrangements. Yet unlike "repressive state apparatuses" (the military, police, legal system, etc.) that make the social cohere by violence or its threat, and that function uniformly in the interests of the state, ideological state apparatuses are distanced from the immediate power of the state and are thus open to internal class conflict. "Ideological State Apparatuses are multiple, distinct, 'relatively autonomous' and capable of providing an objective field to contradictions which express, in forms which may be limited or extreme, the effects of the clashes between the capitalist class struggle and the proletarian class struggle, as well as their subordinate forms" ("Ideology" 100). Class struggles within ideological state apparatuses are struggles over the contours of subjectivity, which are in turn struggles within regions of ideology. Althusser

never theorizes precisely the relation of politics to subjectivity, but nothing he wrote forecloses on the possibility of that relation.

<sup>11</sup> Rancière, drawing on archival research into the practices of the nineteenth-century French working class, demonstrates that the “nights of labor” constituted a “harmless and imperceptible interruption of the normal round” of daytime labor and class oppression. Through their night-time activities (cultural production, political organizing, writing, intellectual work), these workers “prepare and dream and already live the impossible: the suspension of the ancestral hierarchy subordinating those dedicated to manual labor to those who have been given the privilege of thinking” (*Nights* viii). Rancière conceptualizes this space and time in which workers do things other than work as the *demos*, and it is out of the *demos*, *not* out of the arrangements of labor pertaining under capitalism, that politics emerge. The *demos* is thus a site of productive negativity, “the collection of workers insofar as they have the time to do something other than their work and to find themselves in another place than that of its performance. It is the empty supplement accounting for social parties and organizations” (*Philosopher* 226). In his massive study *Cultures of Darkness*, Bryan Palmer collects numerous instances from global history dating back to the middle ages of such subversive political and cultural night-time production. For Palmer, the space of social marginality—the space of the night—is a site of transgressive potential. Palmer undertakes this study in part to expand orthodox Marxism, which has “looked inadequately into the night and paid insufficient attention to dimensions of subordination, marginalization, and transgression not directly and unambiguously connected, via the wage and struggles over its contents, to the labor-capital relation” (456).

<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to Jared Secord, a fellow participant in the 2010 Mellon Humanities Dissertation Seminar at the University of Michigan, for bringing the Mamluk squadron to my attention.

<sup>13</sup> As Edwards explains, his structural conception of the black diaspora is partially indebted to Althusser’s conception of the social as a structure in dominance in which the unity of the whole is located in the complexly overdetermined, uneven relations and interchanges between its internal, relatively-autonomous sites (Edwards 11-12). In one chapter of his monumental study *The Practice of Diaspora*, Edwards offers an insightful reading of Claude McKay’s *Banjo* that situates some of my own thematic concerns here—the lumpenproletariat, the process of imagining and articulating alternative racial internationalisms—in McKay’s representation of the underworlds of interwar Marseilles (187-240).

<sup>14</sup> In *Marxism and Form*, Fredric Jameson explains the epistemological consequence, for Marxism, of the commodity fetish. As a result of the “peculiar reality” of both exchange and use values, Marxism “has at its disposal two alternate languages . . . in which any given phenomenon can be described. Thus history can be written either subjectively, as the history of class struggle, or objectively, as the development of the economic modes of production and their evolution from their own internal contradictions: these two formulae are the same, and any statement in one can without loss of meaning be translated into the other” (297). As Jameson indicates, political activity finds its equivalent not with use value, but with exchange value. This paradox is crucial to a host of attempts, from Lukács to Althusser, to theorize the *necessity* of the social and the ideological, levels of existence whose epistemological value is at best of a second order.

<sup>15</sup> The fact that the Spanish fascists employed African troops as mercenaries complicated the racial dynamics of the war, especially for African-American Communists who, energized by Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, fought on the side of the Republicans. Not only was Republican propaganda against Franco’s “Moors” (a term applied with varying degrees of racist intent to various North African groups) frequently vitriolic in its racism, and not only were African-Americans in the Lincoln Brigade sometimes subjected to those same racist responses, but in Robin D.G. Kelley’s words, “Franco’s use of Moroccan troops was disheartening to black volunteers whose Pan-Africanist and pro-Ethiopian sentiments brought them to Spain in the first place” (146). Kelley’s *Race Rebels* provides the best overview of the motives and experiences of African-American volunteers in the Lincoln Brigade.

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### Chapter 3

#### **The Addict's Revolt: The Postwar Anti-Capitalism of *The Man with the Golden Arm***

Of all Algren's novels, *The Man with the Golden Arm* is certainly the book for which he is best known. It won the first National Book Award in 1950 and was adapted into a major motion picture that challenged Hollywood's Motion Picture Production Code.<sup>1</sup> It seems safe to say that its reputation rests primarily on two grounds. First, its consciously overwritten style (in which it resembles other postwar works like Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* or Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*) elevates the phenomenological perspective of the lower-class, inner-city ethnic subject to the level of the lyrical and metaphysical while preserving, in that elevation, the "low" talk and vocabularies of the street. A rich autumnal tone at once contemplatively disillusioned and apocalyptically urgent pervades the novel, providing aesthetic rewards of its own and lending a mythical, near-gothic aura to the postwar American city. This remarkable stylistic work has caused some critics to read the novel as a divergence—in terms of not only form, but also worldview and political commitment—from Algren's 1930s works, which are usually cast as crudely naturalistic and/or politically pedantic by comparison.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, the novel is well-known for its depiction of morphine addiction, a subject matter that is often misread or misremembered as central to the book's project.<sup>3</sup> Of course, careful readers of the novel have long identified this as a misreading. As early as 1957, George Bluestone pointed out that the addiction plot line was only added late in the drafting process, at an editor's suggestion. "Clearly, the problem of drug addiction is not Algren's main concern" (36). Yet as a later monograph on Algren notes, "[t]his afterthought became the most dramatic, in some ways the most significant, and the most sensational aspect of the new novel" (Cox and Chatterton 112).

What hasn't been properly noticed, however, is the book's *radicalism*, and I mean that in two interrelated ways. First, the book is an adapted continuation of, rather than a divergence from, Algren's 1930s Marxist commitments. As we'll see below, even

Communist reviewers missed the political investments of the novel. More recently, Carlo Rotella's excellent literary and material historicization of the novel's stylistic choices also misses this fact. Rotella argues that the historical shift registered through the novel's apocalyptic lyricism is the postwar decline of the American manufacturing-based city and the dissolution of its urban ethnic neighborhoods. In a remarkable performance, Algren uses the novel's style, and the concise "intensely personal or essentially mythic" tragedies of its characters, "to figure the messy, complex, open-ended, and only intermittently visible transformations of urban life and literature underway in midcentury Chicago" (89-90). Accompanying this historical urban transformation is the decline of the Chicago-based tradition of urban realism and its protocols for representing the city, a tradition in which Algren participates and in which he positions *Golden Arm* as the endpoint, "an elegy for industrial urbanism, the way of living in cities represented by both smokestacks and *Sister Carrie*" (90). Rotella's is the best critical reading of *Golden Arm* to date because it provides literary-historical and materialist frameworks (rather than mystified evaluative or psychological ones) for making sense of the book's conspicuous style. Yet while I second Rotella's method in historicizing the novel's language (a method I seek, to a certain extent, to parallel), the objects of the novel's figurative stylistic work, I argue, are in fact the possibilities, conditions, and chances of Marxist radicalism in a reactionary, conformist historical moment. What Algren seeks in *The Man with the Golden Arm* is what Ralph Ellison will seek in *Invisible Man*: the figurative resources through which anti-capitalism can be produced in literary practice.

The major resources in this project, for Algren, are drug use and drug addiction. Frankie "Machine" Majcinek, the novel's addict protagonist, is a figure for the author himself, and his act of morphine injection and his attendant bodily addiction to the substance are figures for the formal, compositional work of the novel itself. In my reading of *Golden Arm*, Frankie's drug use enables—writes—a complex sociosymbolic process that aims to analyze the social structure in dominance of postwar society, and to allegorize a collective anti-capitalist politics that seeks to re-energize and tap into the lost energies and hopes of the Depression 1930s. In other words, the novel deploys a startling and unusual formal radicalism as the mechanism for its political radicalism. The production of the novel's epistemological and political agendas is troped through the

actions of the criminal addict. The identificatory conceit governing these twin radicalisms adds substance to Algren's insistence that writers take the side of the oppressed and disenfranchised. As we've seen, Algren frequently made pronouncements like his 1961 insistence that true literature "derived" from, to quote Whitman, "the spirit of 'I belong to these convicts and prostitutes myself'" (Afterword 94).<sup>4</sup> It would be easy to see Algren's program as a form of literary slumming, an ill-advised advocacy politics (speaking for America's class subalterns), or moralistic sentimentality. One could also understand it as stipulating the proper subject matter of literature. As I hope to show, however, Algren's association of writers with the lumpenproletariat should be read as his manner of describing the complex formal lumpen-author exchange that he initiated in *Somebody in Boots* and takes to new heights in *Golden Arm*. Critics have often noted Algren's pity and compassion for his down-and-out characters, an undeniably accurate account of Algren's affective relationship to the downcast, yet one that tends to obscure the complex cognitive work he performs within that relationship.<sup>5</sup> Further, it's important to note that Algren never intends to romanticize or privilege drug use as an actual mode of political resistance: as we'll see, he found the act of shooting up unbearable to watch, and knew that the ravages of addiction prevented rather than constituted political agency. His engagement with drug use as an epistemological and political project is a *literary* engagement, an innovative and non-mimetic formal strategy. If my reading of *Golden Arm* (along with the rest of this study) does one thing for Algren's critical reputation, I hope it prompts a re-examination of him as an avant-garde, a writer whose salient achievement is less his compassion than his politically-committed textual innovations.

It is no doubt the case that, in James Giles's words, Algren's post-Depression work aims to "[shock] his middle-class readers into full recognition of the humanity of the outcast inhabitants of the lower depths" (23). But Algren undertakes his self-location among the lumpenproletariat, especially in the postwar era, for epistemological as well as moral reasons. Algren identified the lumpen as occupying the margin or limit of the material and ideological arrangements of postwar American society. This is not to say that he understood them as outside or beyond the structure of that society (in all of Algren's work, the lumpenproletariat dwell never far from the reach of the police and legal apparatuses), but rather that their condition and place within that society troubled

postwar America's favorite narratives about itself. In *Nonconformity*, Algren argued that the postwar era was one in which "soundscreens" and "smokescreens" are used to conceal the fact that Americans live "in a laboratory of human suffering as vast and terrible as that in which Dickens and Dostoevsky wrote" (73). In *Golden Arm*, the prisoners in an early jail scene are described as robbed of all but

The great, secret and special American guilt of owning nothing, nothing at all, in the one land where ownership and virtue are one. Guilt that lay crouched behind every billboard which gave each man his commandments; for each man here had failed the billboards all down the line. No Ford in this one's future nor ever any place all his own. Had failed before the radio commercials, by the streetcar plugs and by the standard of every self-respecting magazine. (19)

The lumpenproletariat here de-universalizes the ideological precepts of consumer-driven postwar capitalist America. Lizabeth Cohen has shown that the postwar rise of a mass consumption economy was as much an ideological and political mechanism as an economic one. It was designed to demonstrate and justify the superiority of the United States's economic and political systems, as abundance of consumer choice became something of a figure for the freedom of democracy. Further, the celebration of mass consumption served to deflect socialist critiques of capitalism (124-7). "Widespread American home ownership and high living standards, the argument went, put to rest Soviet charges that capitalism created extremes of wealth and poverty, and secured a firm foundation for American freedom" (125). The consumer economy provided an ideological justification for the Red Scare.

Even the proletariat—orthodox Marxism's social, material, and discursive antagonist to such capitalist universalisms—was incorporated into this postwar order. According to Laura Hapke, the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, by instituting (among its numerous anti-labor reforms) loyalty oaths for union leaders, helped initiate the de-radicalization of the labor movement. As a precursor of postwar McCarthyism and the extreme anti-Communist turn in American politics, "the act signaled the devastation of the labor Left." Communists were purged from unions, and labor activism was curtailed as "the established heavy-industry trade unions preached consumerism, suburbanization, and the embourgeoisement both terms implied" (249-50). In 1949, the left-wing CIO expelled most of its Communist and pro-Soviet affiliates, securing the hegemony of anti-

Communist labor leaders and effectively negating organized labor as an oppositional sociopolitical force (Patterson 53-5). Mass consumption, whatever its material benefits, did the work of resolving or nullifying the potency of capitalism's contradictions, cementing a postwar ideology of patriotic conformity and consensus in which, as Algren saw, "ownership and virtue are one." Or in Lizabeth Cohen's terms: "Faith in a mass consumption postwar economy . . . stood for an elaborate, integrated ideal of economic abundance and democratic political freedom, both equitably distributed, that became almost a national civil religion from the late 1940s into the 1970s" (127).

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno observe in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) that in an administered society of official abundance like postwar America, "anyone who goes hungry and suffers from cold, especially if he once had good prospects, is a marked man. He is an outsider, and—with the occasional exception of the capital crime—to be an outsider is the gravest guilt" (121). Algren, surveying the same sociopolitical landscape as Horkheimer and Adorno, concurred with the Frankfurt School theorists. Behind the billboards that equate virtue with property and with patriotic participation in a growing mass economy, it is the "guilty," "criminal," and "immoral" social outsiders, those non-aligned with the main structures of American society, who could figure the negative space required for epistemological critique and political dissent. "Our myths are so many, our vision so dim, our self-deception so deep and our smugness so gross that scarcely any way remains of reporting the American Century except from behind the billboards" (*Nonconformity* 76). The experiences of these lumpen outsiders—when figuratively appropriated by Algren's literary practice—function as symptomatic critiques of postwar universalism.

Yet for Algren, the postwar lumpen were not only symptoms: he also ascribed a symbolic mode of agency to these outsiders. In *Nonconformity*, Algren postulated that a "lonely guilt pervades" postwar society and he tied this guilt specifically to the hegemony of a consumer culture, "the spiritual desolation of men and women made incapable of using themselves for anything more satisfying than the promotion of chewing gum, a goo with a special ingredient or some detergent ever-urgent." The social origin of this desolation, however, cannot be fully understood: instead, experienced as a psychological mode of ennui, it is assuaged through alcoholic excess, drugs, or gambling. It is also

assuaged through political victimization. “For those to whom drink or drugs or dice are unthinkable, Joe McCarthy is the boy with the proper answers.” But the drug addict, Algren insisted, was different: “The addict’s revolt has a special grace. When he shoves a needle into his vein it is, in a sense, to spare others” (45-8). Algren’s approach to drug addiction in *Golden Arm* doesn’t share this suicidal valence. However, the understanding of drug use as simultaneously a socially-determined condition and a subjective action is central to his deployment of the addict in *Golden Arm*. Because of his material and ideological marginalization, the addict—through the symbolic valences of the *act* of using—produces an awareness of social processes and renews revolutionary contradiction. The hypodermic needle is a metaphorical pen, and the addict’s revolt a figure for revolution.

Hence, immediately after his account in *Golden Arm* of the lumpen’s “special American guilt,” Algren renders their consequent potential, their unvanquished, if desperate, vibrancy. “And yet they spoke and yet they laughed; and even the most maimed wreck of them all held, like a pennant in that drifting light, some frayed remnant of laughter from unfrayed years. Like a soiled rag waved by a drunken peddler in a cheap bazaar” (19). Later in the novel, Algren figures that potentiality inscribed within social negativity with a chiasmic device, describing the lumpen as “the damned and the undaunted, the jaunty and condemned” (194). As the first passage indicates, *Golden Arm* forms its anti-capitalism around a backward historical glance; it recalls, as I will argue, the 1930s as the strategically (mis)remembered “unfrayed years” of the Communist Old Left. Algren is not simply nostalgic for some imagined heyday of 1930s leftism; rather, he tries to revamp the political spirit of the 1930s—an “undaunted” and “jaunty” revolutionary collectivism—in a repressive, reactionary sociopolitical climate. Algren turns to the lumpenproletariat to figuratively recover possibilities for American literary Marxism. *Golden Arm*’s wager is that the postwar location of anti-capitalism is not the proletariat, but the social underworld of which the drug addict is a part.

Algren’s novel instructs us that it’s not enough for the committed writer to simply feel compassion for that social underworld, because compassion, on its own, situates the writer at too far of a remove from the oppressed. At one point in *Golden Arm*, Frankie describes a reporter he once encountered in his inner-city neighborhood: “I seen one

come into the Victory on North Clark one night ‘n set down with one bottle of beer ‘n wrote in a little book-like, everythin’ that was goin’ on, what the people said. Then he picked up ‘n didn’t even touch his beer. He didn’t touch his beer was how I knew there was somethin’ wrong with him” (214). Compassion resembles the voyeurism critiqued here in that it leads the writer to produce mere empirical descriptions of, rather than figurative appropriations and theoretical (re)constructions of, lumpenproletarian life. To demonstrate how Algren does it the hard way—how he not only enters the bar, but drinks his beer—is the burden of my reading of *Golden Arm*. To embark on this reading, I turn to Louis Althusser’s conceptualization of the social as a structure in dominance in which relatively autonomous sites are related, in terms of determinative impact and influence, differentially and unevenly. It is this understanding of social form and process—the most complex model of society offered by Marxist theory—that best illuminates *Golden Arm*’s equally intricate approach to the structure of postwar society and the difficulties involved in knowing that structure. In the next section, I scrutinize the complex figurative operations of morphine and morphine addiction in the novel. I position *Golden Arm* alongside some ventures of critical theory into the epistemological and political dimensions of addiction. In the third and final section, I reconstruct the anti-capitalist political allegory put into motion (or more accurately, *written*) by Frankie’s drug use. In order to make visible the terms of this allegory, I identify various textual cues that, I argue, speak a coded and secret language to the attuned reader, signifying the potential for a revolutionary politics of collectivity through an invocation of the prohibited, forgotten forms of 1930s radicalism. The intimation of secret messages proliferates in the novel: there is a “secret meaning” in the “voices . . . of the air shaft”; there is “the endless humming of telephone wires murmuring insanely from street to street without ever saying a single word above a whisper that a really sensible person might understand” (93, 96). Like Algren’s model of the committed author, the reader of *Golden Arm* must listen for these hints of the political and the utopian in the world of the lumpen and in the conspicuous style of the text.

### **Figuring Totality: The Overdetermination of Division Street**

*Golden Arm* weaves a dense portrait of the lumpenproletarian denizens of the Polish-American Division Street neighborhood of Chicago with the struggles of Frankie “Machine” Majcinek, who has returned to the neighborhood from military service in Europe. The narrative opens at the end of 1946. Back in Chicago, Frankie works as a card dealer in a poker room, where his skill at rapid dealing has earned him the nickname that serves as the novel’s title. His job involves him in the complicated interrelations between the city machine and the criminal underworld: at the start of the novel, Frankie and his friend and side-kick Solly “Sparrow” Saltskin (a kind-hearted if hapless and mostly unsuccessful petty thief) are in jail, having been arrested as a reminder to Zero Schwiefka, the proprietor of the poker room in which Frankie deals, that he owes kickbacks to the police.

Frankie’s personal situation is troubled, to say the least. He has brought back from Europe an addiction to morphine, developed while being treated for a wound in a field hospital. His wife Sophie is paralyzed and wheel-chair bound, having been injured when Frankie crashed their car after a night out drinking to mark the day the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima (though it is ambiguous whether her paralysis is actual or psychosomatic). In her paralysis, Sophie has developed an obsession with impending apocalypse. She sits by her window reading her own paralysis (both literal and figurative) into and through the visible urban landscape: “God has forgotten us all,” she at one point declares (99). By the end of the novel, she eventually suffers a complete breakdown and is institutionalized. In part to escape the destructiveness of his guilt over Sophie’s paralysis, Frankie feeds his morphine addiction by visiting “Nifty” Louie, a dealer who serves his clients in a room above the Club Safari. The affectionate Molly Novotny, a young woman who hustles drinks at the local bar to support Drunkie John, her abusive lover, is the novel’s hopeful alternative to Sophie’s resigned doom and to Frankie’s increasing dependence on morphine. She embodies, for Frankie, the chance of salvation from both Sophie and morphine.

Frankie’s downfall begins when he kills “Nifty” Louie in a fit of anger and helplessness. No one around Division Street misses Louie, but the kinship of the underworld and the city establishment requires the police to find his killer, since Louie “owed too much” and his “connections were too good” (274). At first the police don’t

take action, and Frankie spends most of 1947 in prison for attempting to steal electric irons from a department store (the heist is Sparrow's idea, but Sparrow ducks the store detectives and lets Frankie get nabbed with the loot when the plan goes awry). Frankie returns to Division Street in September but is soon pursued by the law. With the election year of 1948 looming, the Chicago Democratic Party machine faces extra political pressure to have Louie's murder solved. The local police captain, Bednar, is pressured from above into bringing in the culprit. The police set up Sparrow and, following a lengthy and intimidating interrogation, coerce and threaten him into giving Frankie away as the killer. Frankie is able to flee Division Street just ahead of the cops, and he and Molly hide out in the Lake Street area of Chicago. While hiding out from the law, Molly helps Frankie work to overcome his morphine addiction. However, the police eventually catch up with them: shot while making a narrow escape, Frankie seeks shelter in a cheap hotel and hangs himself.

As critics have noted since the novel's publication, there are neither obvious indications of political radicalism, nor empirical descriptions of postwar America's arrangements of power, in this narrative. The Communist press, while praising the novel's style and characterizations, faulted Algren for what they misread as the novel's apolitical outlook. The *Daily Worker* reviewer found that the fates of Algren's characters had "all the inevitability of an ancient Greek oracle." As a result, the review suggested, the novel reproduced and naturalized the power structures of capitalism (Friedman 13). In the Communist-oriented *Masses & Mainstream*, Sidney Finkelstein complained that the world of Algren's novel was "not a real one," in that it omitted the contradictions that generated dynamism and revolutionary transformation in the real world. "It is unreal because a real world must be in motion." He went on to fault Algren for not representing any political organization or agency in the slums. "I was brought up in the slums, and I remember the gangs," he admits. "But I also remember a grandfather who was proud of a union card, and a crowd of people cheering the election returns of the then militant Socialist Party" (84). Nothing of that sort happens in *Golden Arm*. On the other side of the political spectrum, Norman Podhoretz, never fond of Algren's work, nonetheless seemed to have grasped that there was a secret set of messages embedded somewhere in the novel—he just thought Algren didn't have the talent to bring them to the surface.

According to Podhoretz, *Golden Arm* “was a book full of half-realized attitudes identifying themselves only in a distant whisper; it was a book that never quite discovered what it wanted to say” (132). What Podhoretz is actually intuiting is how, in an era of red scares and enforced sociopolitical conformity, Algren’s radicalism goes underground, into the figurative underworld of *Golden Arm*, where it makes itself known only by “distant whispers” that even Communists could miss. Hence, in order to delineate the Marxist epistemological and political work performed by *Golden Arm*, we must attend to two major symbolic operations of the novel: the manner by which Frankie’s morphine use and addiction is figured by Algren as a cognitive act; and the politically-charged allegorical resonances of Frankie’s relationship with Molly, his attempt to kick his addiction, and his flight from the police.

Algren’s vision of the postwar American landscape can be theoretically explicated by reference to Althusser’s description of the social as an overdetermined structure in dominance. This concept allows us to explain what the *Daily Worker* reviewer identified as the fated “inevitability” of the characters’ trajectories—Frankie and his fellow Division Street denizens *do* seem to be entrapped and determined, but that determination only seems inevitable because the characters are unable to assign it precise material sociopolitical coordinates. As a result, they experience their social delimitation in mystified, figurative terms. To the poker-dealing Frankie, “life was pretty much of an all-night stud session. With himself in the dealer’s slot and Zero Schwiefka getting the take” (106). Sophie intuitively grasps that her paralysis and sense of doom somehow have larger social relevance, and the apocalyptic expostulation of that intuition compensates for her inability to grasp that relevance. “For the city too was somehow crippled of late,” she thinks. “The city too seemed a little insane. Crippled and caught and done for with everyone in it.” She imagines how, like herself, “the city was bound, from southeast to the unknown west, steel upon steel upon steel: how all its rails held the city too tightly to the thousand-girdered El” (96). In both examples, Frankie and Sophie link themselves to the actual social totality of the city (as both a set of underworld power arrangements and a modern technological space, respectively) through imprecise, impressionistic figurative language. Such imprecision could be read, as Algren’s Communist critics read it, as a

retreat from politics to metaphysics. I read it as a necessary result of the complex ontology of the city and postwar America as social formations.

Althusser's theory of social form explains why social knowledge might only be available through Frankie and Sophie's figurative language. To use Althusserian terminology, the epistemological imprecision attendant on Frankie and Sophie's perspectives derives from their overdetermined location within the social formation of the postwar moment. Althusser uses the concept of overdetermination to revise the age-old Marxist theory of economic determination, which often reductively asserted that the economic base of capitalism was straightforwardly reflected in every aspect or phenomenon of modern society. In response, Althusser describes the social totality of a given conjuncture as a "structure in dominance": a dynamic, contingent set of relatively autonomous social sites and positions related to each other through *difference* and *distinction*. Yet despite being structured by internal difference and gaps between component social sites, the structure is still determined by the economic in that its ultimate *function* is ruling-class *dominance*. But Althusser reconceives the economic as immanent to the social rather than removed from it. He thus collapses the base/superstructure topology of traditional Marxism. Determination of the social comes not from an exterior or underlying base, but consists of differential, uneven relations between autonomous levels or sites in a social formation. In Alex Callinicos's words, "[t]he causality of the whole consists in the relations subsisting between its effects" (50). Because those sites are heterogeneous, autonomous, unevenly developed and yet determinatively related, Althusser considers them to be *overdetermined*, exceeding in their complexity the cognitive grasp of any prior, universal account of how social processes "should work."

Overdetermination thus describes any social location's multifaceted relation to the totality of the social formation. But that totality is not a homogenizing essence: it has no identity apart from its components and the irreducibly complex relations among them. Because the ultimate determination of the economic is configured *through* the interrelated levels and networks of a specific social formation, one cannot just refer to "the economic" when seeking to understand the social: "the economic" means nothing more than the fact of the internally-variant and fluid structure of society. Thus, the

ontology of the social, for Althusser, necessitates contingent experiments and innovations in epistemological method. In my opinion, what Althusser is up to here is best described by Warren Montag, who argues that Althusser's theory of immanent or structural causality—the social's internal determination of itself—serves a ground-clearing function. It is a theory “whose primary value lay in its excluding other theories of causality and pointing out the need for a new concept.” It signals the “imperative” to map the “precise relations” among social sites without recourse to idealisms (73). In other words, structural or immanent causality, due to its complexity, *enables* and *mandates* theoretical practice.<sup>6</sup>

Yet since vectors of social determination and relationality are overdetermined, they tend to resist empirical construal and call instead for cognitive mapping, Fredric Jameson's project of Marxist cultural production. Cognitive mapping is an aesthetic practice that strives to grasp the relational mediations of the social totality in an historical moment in which those mediations have been obscured by ideological (mis)representation and the sheer (inter)national size of capitalist networks of production and distribution. This “pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system” is necessarily, due to the complexity of that system, *not* empirical in its procedures (*Postmodernism* 54). That is, it must develop formally-innovative, figurative strategies for grasping a capitalist totality that can no longer be described without the intervention of those aesthetic strategies. Jameson's concept implies that radical representational work compensates for the inadequate (because historically-outmoded) procedures and assumptions of realistic or descriptive analysis. The “pedagogic political culture” of cognitive mapping thus locates itself in the *irreducible* epistemological gap between the totality and the singular perspective, between the immediacy of the local and particular and the governing realities of the general.

Beneath official ideologies of Cold War conformity and consumer abundance, the complex structure of social relations that constitutes postwar American society needs to be sought out and in some way grasped by Marxist theory. As we've seen, Frankie and Sophie can *figuratively* sense the porousness of their social location to multiple local and global determinative relations. Frankie, for instance, experiences his underworld

economic position as a dealer as, dimly, the logic by which the entirety of his life is organized. The figurative in this case is paradoxically the inadequate yet necessary mode social analysis takes, the only way to cognitively map a social structure whose complexity defeats empirical depiction.

In one lyrical flight, *Golden Arm* displays an Althusserian understanding of the social by figuratively construing the differential unity of Chicago as a social structure in dominance. When Frankie is imprisoned for the department store fiasco, the narrative locates the starkly-delimited space of the prison within the social totality: “Somewhere far above a steel moon shone, with equal grandeur, upon boulevard, alley and park; flophouse and penthouse, apartment hotel and tenement. Shone with that sort of wintry light that makes every city chimney, standing out against it in the cold, seem a sort of altar against a driving sky” (184). The “steel moon” (an image alluding to the economically-determined *materiality* of the social) totalizes the autonomous levels of the social while preserving the concrete identity—the relative autonomy—of each. That is, each social site is bathed in the same light but also “[stands] out against” that light in its full particularity.

This passage is one instance of how *Golden Arm*'s conspicuous style does the work of cognitive mapping, variously relating its confined, claustrophobic accounts of inner-city Chicago to the temporal and structural totality of the postwar moment. For instance, the significance of Sophie's accident and paralysis exceeds its role as the psychological grounds of Frankie's guilt. This accident is historically coded in subtle yet unmistakable ways, occurring as it does after a night of drinking to commemorate the atomic bombing of Hiroshima:

They had been drinking at the Tug & Maul that night, with Owner serving something he called Antek's A-Bomb Special, made simply by pouring triple shots instead of doubles into his glasses. It was almost time to go home and the barflies were pleading for just one more Special and just one more tune. Owner wouldn't serve another but let the juke play one last sad bar of the final song of a world that had known neither A-bombs nor A-Bomb Specials. (68)

Antek, the “Owner” of the local bar, attempts to cash in on world historical events through a drink promotion and thereby creates the terms for a figurative rendering of

impending historical change: the protests against the bar closing become the futile last utopian assertions of a “world that had known neither A-bombs nor A-Bomb Specials.”

By figuratively linking Antek’s A-Bomb Specials to the A-bomb, Algren establishes the car accident, which ensues when Frankie and Sophie leave the bar, as a figure for the advent of the Cold War. Frankie and Sophie thus live the objective onset of the Cold War in mediated form as a personal and psychological trauma. Only a few days after the accident—on the night of V-J Day, the end of the war, on the eve of the Cold War—Sophie wakes up in the night and finds herself paralyzed. Her words at this discovery are tinged with cataclysmic significance: “Wake up, honey. Somethin’s goin’ to happen” (74). Sophie’s experience of her paralysis is linked, through the novel’s apocalyptic lyricism, to the Cold War threat of total annihilation:

For since that night everyone had become afraid of closing time everywhere, of having the lights go out in the middle of the dance while the chimes of all the churches mourned: a requiem for everyone trapped beneath the copper-colored sky of noon or the night-lit ties of the El. (97)

Perceiving the figurative relation between Sophie’s overwrought psychological state and the totality of the social conjuncture helps make sense of the novel’s moments in which the narration is focalized on Sophie’s gloomy sensibility. For instance, her observation from her window that “[n]o one moved easily, freely and unafraid any longer, all hurried worriedly to work and anxiously by night returned; waited despairingly for traffic lights to change, forever fearing that the green light might change too soon” becomes intelligible as an illustration of how the Cold War lurks behind the surface textures of quotidian urban experience (96). Even though the novel is circumscribed in terms of space and character psychology, *Golden Arm*’s carefully crafted language inserts those circumscriptions into the complexities of its historical moment. These insertions are only accomplished intuitively, in gestural rather than precise terms, through imaginative and figurative leaps, but such recourses are the necessary consequences of the overdetermination of postwar society. Overdetermination is the precondition of *Golden Arm*’s innovative poetics, just as, for Althusser, it is the precondition of inventive Marxist theory.

**Rolling ‘Em Up Into One Big Worry: The Addict as Marxist**

In *Golden Arm*, morphine use and addiction are the resources by which political action within and against this social structure is figured. The entire cycle of morphine use—injecting the drug, developing an addiction, and kicking the addiction—is, in *Golden Arm*, a figure for Marxist theoretical and political practice. Frankie explains the logic of this figure late in the novel, in a scene in which he returns to his morphine habit and invites Sparrow to join him. Sparrow says, rejecting the offer, “I got enough worries without that, Frankie.” But the fact of these “worries”—the novel’s social, economic, and political determinants that, as we’ve seen, are often experienced in mystified or psychological terms—is the reason Frankie shoots up.

“That’s just the point, buddy. . . . There’s so many little worries floatin’ around ‘n floatin’ around, why not roll ‘em all up into one big worry? Just like goin’ by the loan shark ‘n gettin’ enough to pay off all the little debts with one big one? That’s where I’m bein’ smarter than you, it shows I’m gettin’ out of the hole. . . .” (260)

Frankie explains to the reader how morphine use works as a mechanism of authorship and knowledge production. His drug use, as he presents it, accomplishes two things simultaneously. First, it symbolically synthesizes the determining factors of his social position. In effect, injection is a cognitive act by which Frankie crystallizes into one epistemologically-manageable object (i.e., his addiction or habit) the various sources of his overdetermined, socially-constituted subjectivity. This cognitive act is also a literary act, as it establishes an allegorical relationship between the concrete object of morphine and the repressions of an unrepresentable social totality. If being addicted to morphine can stand for the condition of being overdetermined by that totality, “kicking the habit” can allegorize the collective resistance of subjects to that totality—such is the allegorical logic of *Golden Arm*’s political project. As I argue below, morphine is an apt symbolic vehicle for this project.

Mainlining morphine is a performance of social exteriorization. After the scene above, word spreads on Division Street that “[t]he dealer’s on the needle” and Frankie loses his job. “[O]vernight he was an outcast of outcasts and a new dealer . . . sat in the slot. . . . For the man on the needle, though he be your brother, is a stranger to every human who lives without morphine” (275-76). As a junkie, Frankie is not only morally ostracized but materially excluded from an already “outcast” semi-criminal demographic.

In the novel's Chicago, since the underworld and the ruling apparatuses are interlinked, to be a member of the underworld lumpenproletariat is *not*, in fact, to be socially illegitimate or marginal. Amidst the dark back alleys and furtive black-market exchanges of Isaac Newton Bailey's Marseilles, underworld life is marginalized, occurring away from the gaze of sanctioned, legitimate social processes. But in Algren's Chicago, the underworld is intertwined with the legitimate social structure. In fact, the city government is run by an entity—the Democratic Party machine—that combines characteristics of both a political party and the mafia. This local particularity of Chicago accounts for why the popular imagination conflates Chicago and corruption. It lends a degree of objectivity to Sparrow's claim to be a businessman: "a businessman is a hustler with the dough to hustle on the legit 'n a hustler is a businessman who's either gone broke or never had it. Back me up with five grand tonight 'n tomorrow mornin' I get a invitation to join the Chamber of Commerce 'n no questions asked" (104). If conformity is the keynote of American postwar ideology, the social arrangements of Chicago ensure that conformity within the city. In Chicago, everyone (and contra Horkheimer and Adorno, even the hungry and the cold) is in on the hustle, *except* the junkie. Injecting morphine, for Frankie and for Algren, is a way of recovering outsider status for the purpose of figuring political action and new collective identities from the margins of the social structure in dominance.

Of course, like Ellison's invisible man, who in a similar performance of politically-oriented social exteriorization retreats underground, Frankie of course only achieves a *symbolic* marginality through drug use. The position of the addict does not in some naïve way transcend social determination, and invisible man's hole doesn't exist on any real map of New York City. As a symbolic retreat, turning to the needle enables only a symbolic mode of Marxist theory. Hence, *Golden Arm* makes figurative use of drug addiction in a dialectical manner: it is the act by which Frankie objectifies his overdetermined social position in order to confront the totality of the social, but also the act by which one assumes (by imaginatively constructing) a position of exteriority to the social. In other words, it is a symbolic act of two movements, the first of which makes a figurative mode of theory possible, while the second makes a figurative mode of politics possible. In an era of delimited real-world political options, drug addiction allows Algren

to *imagine* (a term referencing both constructive effort as well as illusion or error, as we saw in Algren's multi-level correlation of lying with political production in "He Couldn't Boogie-Woogie Worth a Damn") Marxism at work.

Thus, when *Golden Arm* is remembered—to cite Laura Hapke's description as one example—as "novel on gambling and drug addiction," it is in fact misremembered or at best inadequately understood (252). In fact, the realities of morphine use and addiction are scarcely present in the novel: *Golden Arm* is not about the phenomenological experience of substance addiction. The sensory effect of morphine is noted ("It hit the heart like a runaway locomotive, it hit like a falling wall" [59]), but that experience is not thematically motivated. For one thing, Algren was not a user himself. While he associated with addicts, he seems to have been repulsed by morphine use. "I have an aversion to needles," he said in a 1955 interview. "I mean, if a guy goes into the can with a cigar-box under his arm, I don't want no part of *that*, I don't *want* to see it." When asked in the same interview if he ever considered taking narcotics in order to write of the addict's experience more authentically, Algren replied bluntly: "No. No, I think you can do a thing like that best from a detached position" (Anderson and Southern 42, 44). In *The Mandarins*, Simone de Beauvoir's *roman à clef* that narrates her romantic liaison with Algren, Lewis Brogan (Algren) similarly denies ever taking dope: "You know how I am: I love everything that's dangerous—but from a distance" (467). Algren also knew that, literally, the drug addict makes an unlikely theorist or political agent. In the interview cited above, Algren describes overhearing a critical reception of his novel given by a pair of addicts. The first addict critiques the novel for not being an accurate account of the experience of morphine use: "you know it ain't so, it ain't like that." The second addict responds: "well, on the other hand, if he *really* knew what he was talking about, he couldn't write the book, he'd be out in the can" (Anderson and Southern 44). When relating the same story in the 1960s, Algren has his second addict conclude, quite simply, "[y]ou can't write a book when you're on junk" (Donohue 142). More precisely, you can't occupy a perceptual position for social critique, or be an agent of praxis, when you're on junk—as Algren declares, all an addict "does is crawl up in some flophouse and lock the door and go to sleep" (Donohue 124).

Frankie's morphine addiction was only added to the novel at a later stage in the drafting process: "I'd sent the book to the agent," Algren explained, "and the agent said she liked it and all that, but it needed a *peg*, it didn't seem to be hung on anything" (Anderson and Southern 41). Hence, the presence of morphine use and addiction in the novel must be understood as a formal mechanism. As both Algren's "peg" on which a treatment of postwar American society coalesces, and Frankie's "one big worry" that imaginatively draws together the social totality, morphine use formally structures the novel's political agenda. As the novel itself reminds us, Frankie picked up his habit in World War II while being treated for a wound "in a windy ward tent on the narrow Meuse" (57). The pun of Meuse and "muse" suggests the compositional agency of drug use.

To put the epistemological and political agency of drug use in motion, Algren motivates the social and historical coordinates of morphine and of Frankie's addiction. As Marcus Boon argues, morphine was a historical product of modernization. It was the first alkaloid, and its processing helped give rise to the modern pharmaceutical industry. Morphine was not the first widely used narcotic, but its cultural implications were novel. "Morphine had none of the Oriental mystique of opium—even the name was derived from the Latin," writes Boon. "Morphine was profane, modern, part of the culture of speed, intensification, and molecularization that developed in the second half of the nineteenth century" (47). Timothy Hickman has shown how, in *American Gilded Age and Progressive Era* medical discourse, narcotic addiction was a site within which anxieties about modernity, and modernity's delimitation of individual autonomy, could be articulated. "If narcotic use was a product of modern technology," Hickman argues, "it also served as a symptom of modernity itself" (1280). Morphine's status as a product of modern technological development puts it in a synecdochic relationship with modern capitalism: there is thus discursive precedence for using morphine to figuratively cognitivize emergent social forms.

Frankie's addiction stems from his experience in World War II, a motivated choice in characterization that differentiates him as an addict. In terms of broader national trends of addiction, Algren's decision to make Frankie a morphine addict is somewhat unusual. By the 1930s, heroin had largely supplanted morphine as the most commonly

used nonmedical narcotic (Courtwright 104-9). As a morphine user, then, Frankie is not just some representative American addict: Algren particularizes his addiction as a product of military service. Frankie knows (but only dimly) that his troubled social position is somehow a consequence of the complex global event that was World War II: “if there had been no war at all, if he hadn’t volunteered, if there had been no accident, if there hadn’t been this and there hadn’t been that, then everything would certainly have turned out a lot better for Frankie” (112). One of the lasting impacts of the Second World War was a restructuring of Americans’ relationships to larger social networks. The demands of military mobilization put a relatively static American population into movement, both overseas and within the country’s borders. According to David Kennedy, one in nine Americans relocated for military training, while one of every eight non-enlisted citizens changed residences within the U.S. “Not since the great surge of pioneers across the Appalachian crest in the early years of the Republic had so many Americans been on the move” (747). The war shattered a longstanding American tendency toward isolationism in global affairs. Kennedy argues that the real legacy of World War II was globalization, “America’s leadership in inaugurating an era of global economic interdependence” through the Marshall Plan, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and other initiatives (855). In the form of an addiction to morphine—in the novel, the tangible consequence of World War II—Frankie brings this global relationality “home” to an internally-unsettled America. His return to Division Street figures the entrance of America into a postwar era of overdetermined, dynamic global relations.

There is a final figurative valence of the military roots of Frankie’s addiction that the novel motivates, one that speaks to the *political* potential of morphine addiction as a figure. In jail at the beginning of the novel, Frankie is “touched by an old wound fever” and dreams he is back in the ward tent in Europe. In the dream, when Frankie takes morphine, he does so as an imaginary gesture of solidarity with “Private McGantic,” Frankie’s fictional alter-ego, an extimate personification of his addiction. He imagines McGantic imploring him for a badly-needed hit: “The private was pointing to where, on the ward sterilizer, a GI syrette, out of some medic’s first-aid kit, lay with the GI quarter-grain ration of morphine beside it, melting whitely even as he watched.” Frankie agrees to help—“You can use my tie”—but when he looks up, McGantic is gone, and Frankie

takes the hit himself (17-18). Through an act of imagination, drug injection becomes a collective, even ethical act: by taking a hit, Frankie comes to the aid of an imagined other. Later, Frankie tells us that “Private McGantic” is constituted by a necessary reaching beyond the self born out of addiction: McGantic is “the projected image of one’s own pain when that pain has become too great to be borne. The image of one hooked so hopelessly on morphine that there would be no getting the monkey off without another’s help” (57). Here, Algren seems to be drawing on the imaginary *esprit de corps* of the army—an ideological, state-centered mode of collectivity—to imagine another, *politically-radical* collectivity, one formed for the purpose of kicking the morphine habit and the social determinations signified by that habit. *Golden Arm* explicitly politicizes Walter Benjamin’s observation that the “intoxicated suck out of one another, so to speak, the bad substances of their being; it is as though they have a cathartic effect on one another” (85).

Frankie’s reaching out to McGantic is an imaginary operation, a figurative exteriorizing of himself as an other, an almost desperate creation of an utterly tenuous collectivity. Yet as Avital Ronell points out, drug use physiologically involves such exteriorization. “Drugs are excentric. They are animated by an outside already inside. Endorphins relate internal secretion to the external chemical.” She observes that when Walter Benjamin describes his experiences with hashish, he does so in part by quoting Baudelaire, just as Thomas de Quincey earlier used Wordsworth in the same fashion. Drug use is thus “depropriative”: accompanying the physiological excentricity of drugs is a figurative dissolving of the drug-using self into otherness. The representation of drug use would seem to be perpetually open to “textual communication based on *tropium*” and the blurring of individual boundaries (29). Ronell also helps us to see how Frankie’s addiction further aligns him with Algren as the novel’s imminent author. “Obsessed and entranced, narcissistic, private, unable to achieve transference, the writer often resembles the addict,” she observes. For Ronell, every society that wages war on drugs is also “hostile to the genuine writer, the figure of the drifter/dissident, which it threatens to expel. Like the addict, such a writer is incapable of producing real value or stabilizing the truth of a real world” (106). Frankie the morphine addict and Algren the dissident writer both confront in order to reject, rather than reiterate and reproduce, the real arrangements

of the social conjuncture. Frankie imagining a collective significance to his addiction parallels, as it symbolically enacts, Algren's work of imagining collective political opposition.

Similarly, we can see the excentric direction of Frankie's usage in terms of Eve Sedgwick's attempt to rethink drug use as *habit* instead of addiction. For Sedgwick, habit is "a version of repeated action that moves, not toward metaphysical absolutes, but toward interrelations of the action—and the self acting—with the bodily habitus, the appareling habit, the sheltering habitation, everything that marks the traces of that habit on a world that the metaphysical absolutes would have left a vacuum." As a set of actions that bring the self into relation with its concrete, material surroundings, habit also "demarcates the space of perceptual and proprioceptive reversal and revelation—revelation at which introspection itself can never arrive" (138, 139). Sedgwick's reclaiming of habit as the mode of drug use allows us to see drug use as a practice of social and material involvement, of direct engagement with the concrete specificity of the social, out of which can come both adequate social knowledge and trans-individual relations. Habit is thus akin to the *perceptual* transformation Walter Benjamin experienced with hashish in Marseilles. The drug, he noted, enabled him to see a material social totality that was nonetheless internally differentiated, one of "only nuances, yet these were the same. I immersed myself in contemplation of the sidewalk before me, which, through a kind of unguent with which I glided over it, could have been—precisely *as* these stones—also the sidewalk of Paris" (123-24).

Drug use, these theorists imply, is not necessarily about transcendence and solipsism; rather, it involves epistemological and political modes of material immanence and collective coming-together. Morphine, then, is a productive figurative vehicle for the thinking and practice of Marxism. Where Algren surpasses these thinkers, however, is in his acknowledgement that drug use only effectively performs this cognitive and political work when imaginatively appropriated. That is, while Ronell, Sedgwick, and Benjamin all veer close to an unadvised romanticization of the actual devastation of drug use, Algren, as we've seen, had no illusions about the real-world costs of addiction. His insistence on morphine use as a historically-specific, situational, and necessarily

*figurative* Marxism allows him to imagine a politics whose ultimate end is a world in which the overdetermined causes of addiction have been negated.

### **Against the Iron Hearts: *Golden Arm*'s Allegory of Collective Politics**

The addict and the radical author at once seek modes of comprehending the social in order to imagine changing it—they seek knowledge that will precede politics. The form of political collectivity that *Golden Arm* seeks to revive is that of the 1930s Communist movement. This link between Frankie the addict and Communism isn't as surprising as it might initially seem. As threatening social outsiders, the drug addict and the Communist were conflated in the postwar era. Caroline Jean Acker argues that heroin users and homosexuals, in the 1950s, were similarly construed in mainstream discourse as both "so deviant as to seem utterly incompatible with conventional roles" but also as "hidden, so that one might encounter an addict or homosexual and fail to recognize him or her." The logic of the Red Scare treated Communists in a similar manner. Harry Anslinger, the first commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, was convinced that Chinese Communists were illicitly distributing heroin in the United States to ease the way for an invasion (Acker 185-6). In postwar America, the Communist and the drug addict weren't far removed. In the second half of *Golden Arm*, Algren endeavors to bring them together, to fashion Frankie's addiction and his relationship with Molly Novotny into an allegorical vehicle capable of reimagining the political hopes of 1930s Communist collectivism.

After Sparrow is finally coerced by the precinct police captain, Bednar, into identifying Frankie as Nifty Louie's murderer, Frankie flees the Polish neighborhood for the "narrow Negro streets" of the Lake Street ghetto (297), where he has heard that Molly is working as a dancer at a strip club. Given the historical associations in Chicago between Communist politics and interracial anti-racism, Frankie's move initiates the political allegory of the novel's final section. After Frankie abandons his apartment and Sophie to escape the police, Sophie's apocalyptic sensibility intensifies as she gazes "[a]ll the way down to the streets where the dark people live and Frankie Machine drank alone" (297). Given the racial demographic of the Lake Street neighborhood, the reference to African Americans is implicit in the phrase, and as Frankie waits for Molly to make an

appearance in the club, he sits “drinking the dark people’s beer” (298). In this manner, a familiar rhetorical move of 1930s Communist radicalism is energized: the use of lower-class and African-American identity to metaphorize each other, and the accompanying equation between interracial activism and revolutionary politics. The first African Americans he sees are two “Negro girl[s]” significantly “wrapped tightly in some old red-sweatered rags” (289). The Communist radicalism of the 1930s may be worn out and ragged by the late 1940s, but *Golden Arm* figures its revitalization by associating it here, in this image, with the vitality of youthful possibility and interracial encounter.

As we’ve seen, the equation of Communism with African Americans and with interracial politics was a hallmark of Algren’s 1930s fiction. It was also evident in the leftist fiction of other Chicago writers. Both Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) and Algren’s *Somebody in Boots*, William Maxwell argues, “[figure] Communism and antiracism as imperatively synonymous.” Bigger Thomas “does not often distinguish between the party” and anti-racism, and Cass McKay “cannot seem to think of Reds without visualizing black and white together” (Maxwell 195). The equation of interracialism and Communism played a role in the publication of *Somebody in Boots*. In the original manuscript, Algren had written Cass McKay’s lover as a mulatto woman named Val. Chicago novelist James T. Farrell, asked by Algren’s publisher to read the manuscript, found this characterization too politically obvious and accused Algren of “putting in the party line” (Drew 83). Algren’s publisher agreed; accordingly, Algren rewrote her as Norah Egan, a white prostitute.<sup>7</sup> Yet Farrell also made use of the interracialism/Communism equation in his own fiction. In *Judgment Day* (1935), Paddy Lonigan has recourse to stock racist, xenophobic, and anti-Communist sentiments as he witnesses a Communist parade. But since his family and finances are threatened by the Depression, he is forced to admit that “even these people, anarchistic Reds, communists, niggers, hunkies, foreigners, left-handed turkeys, even they seemed happier than he” (943).

Bill Mullen has argued that Chicago, as a site of leftist cultural production, was particularly animated by this association between Communism and antiracist struggle. The city’s South Side saw, from 1935 to 1950, an array of fruitful cultural and political projects that grew out of “an extraordinary rapprochement between African-American

and white members of the U.S. Left” (5-6). Communism, especially in Chicago, connoted a coming-together across racial lines in the cause of antiracist, anti-capitalist political collectivity. Frankie and Molly attempt to survive the forces closing in on them by hiding out in a section of Chicago that, because of its racial population, recalls the history of the city’s anti-capitalist collectivism. One of the first things Frankie does on entering the area is toss all his identification documents into a bonfire: the novel rejects the overdetermined individual identity of Frankie Majcinek—“My name is Private Nowhere now”— and references the possibility for a collective overcoming of individual alienation (289). Hence, through a subtle invocation of the transformative collective spirit of 1930s Communism, *Golden Arm* injects an allegorical dimension of collective political action into Molly and Frankie’s relationship.

Molly and Frankie hide from the law in a “two-room first-floor cold-water flat where no one knocked but a Negro housekeeper called Dovie” (309-10). This domestic space, and the harmonious relationship between Molly and Frankie that it inscribes, is infused with a utopian potential underscored by the historical and symbolic resonances of the housekeeper’s race and name. Molly has always, for Frankie, signified an escape not only from Sophie, but from morphine and the social-structural overdetermination signified by morphine. When he first takes up with Molly, her significance to him is partly as an alternative to addiction: “with Molly Novotny’s arms around him, he could resist the sickness and the loneliness that drove him to the room above the Safari” (112). Later, in prison for the department store robbery, Frankie is “seized with the need of hearing Molly Novotny’s teasing voice and a longing for the dark appeal of her eyes. He felt he didn’t care whether he dealt another hand of stud in his life or not” (221). Only Molly can help him kick his addiction: “It would be Molly-O or a quarter-grain fix, he’d never make it alone” (119). Indeed, his desire for Molly operates as a sort of substitute addiction: “He wanted that same Molly so badly his throat felt parched” (177). Frankie’s addiction drives him to Molly, who helps him kick the habit and, in the process, unites with him in a harmonious, inter-subjective bond. Frankie’s epistemological act of rolling up his problems into “one big worry” finds its end in the figurative political collectivity of his relationship with Molly. As Molly helps him battle his addiction in the Lake Street flat, their relationship quickly transcends subjective alienation: “it wasn’t just himself

needing her any longer, it wasn't just taking without any giving. It was nearer fifty-fifty now and that felt better than he'd ever known a thing like that could be." He tells Molly, "I couldn't make it a week by myself . . . 'n you know it" (320).

The figurative alignment of Molly and Frankie's relationship with the collectivist energy of 1930s Communism is partially enabled by the utopian significance of collectivity *itself* as a figure. In Fredric Jameson's words, "[t]he achieved collectivity or organic group of whatever kind . . . is Utopian not in itself, but only insofar as all such collectivities are themselves *figures* for the ultimate concrete collective life of an achieved Utopian or classless society" (*Political Unconscious* 291). Collectivity is fundamentally opposed to alienated bourgeois individualism and is always at least a glimpse of a post-capitalist future. In *Golden Arm*, the principle of real, authentic collectivity (as opposed to proclaimed, ideological conformity) seems to be the only thing that can give the repressive functionaries of capitalism pause. Captain Bednar, interrogating the suspects in the routine police lineup one night, is struck speechless when one tells him, "I believe we are all members of one another" (196). Bednar's complex feelings of guilt, which derive from his role as persecutor of the hapless and the outcast, are intensified by this cryptic response, which he understands as vaguely utopian: "the words had left him with a secret and wishful envy of every man with a sentence hanging over his head like the very promise of salvation" (197). By the end of the novel, Bednar realizes that "those whom he had denied," the victims of police repression, "had all along been members of himself." As a result, he is alienated from collectivity, the basic necessity of human existence: "he belonged to no man at all" (293-4). Frankie and Molly's relationship embodies the political chances of this fundamentally human collectivity.

In *Golden Arm*'s allegory, however, this collectivity is defeated. While Frankie is hiding low, Antek tells him that everyone in the Division Street neighborhood is willing to come together to raise enough money to hire a lawyer who will help Frankie beat the murder rap in court. "Lay off that happy gas, Frankie. If you can beat *that* we'll beat Bednar. Is it a deal?" (318). Again, collective action is figuratively intertwined with Frankie kicking his addiction. Frankie confirms with Antek that "[i]t's a deal," but the narrative warns that "[s]uch deals are so easily made" (318). The abusive, exploitative

Drunkie John soon discovers that Molly is living with Frankie. When Molly can no longer afford to buy John's silence, he tips off the police as to their whereabouts. The police descend on Molly and Frankie's Lake Street apartment, and Frankie makes a narrow escape after being shot in the heel. Once separated from Molly, he knows he is powerless against addiction: "without Molly-O, neither codeine nor paregoric could do it" (323). The policeman's bullet is figuratively aligned with the triumph of Frankie's addiction over him: "a brief, cold, painless flame, like the needle's familiar touch, brushed his heel" (322). Morphine addiction, as a figure for the repressive totality of the social structure, achieves political victory over Frankie's resistance. Frankie flees to a cheap hotel, where he hangs himself sometime in the night of March 31/April 1, 1948 (333). In Frankie's delirium, McGantic, the personification of his addicted self, hands him the noose, "one thin double strand of yellow newspaper twine" (331). The noose references the tie that Frankie had offered McGantic, in his dream, to use for injection in the army ward tent. That earlier moment of collectivity is here recalled in order to be defeated: Frankie, unable to kick his addiction, dies alone at the hands of what that addiction figures—the power of the social structure in dominance. The symbolic epistemological-political project of his habit fails, and he is hung by his addiction.

This outcome registers a key historical defeat of the postwar left: Henry Wallace's failed presidential run under the Progressive Party banner in 1948. Hence, the temporal setting of the novel's ending—April Fool's Day, 1948—is allegorically motivated. To grasp that motivation, the reader must bear in mind that 1948 election-year politics drive the police force's pursuit of Frankie. "You got no idea how bad unsolved murder looks on the books in an election year," Captain Bednar warns Sparrow, pressuring him to name Frankie as Louie's killer. The police superintendent, a functionary of the Democratic political machine, needs to solve the killing in this election cycle. "The Republican precinct captains are handin' out handbills rappin' the super," Bednar continues. "That's where the pressure's on Super 'n that's where I put it on you" (273-4). On the morning of Frankie's final encounter with the police, Antek advises him: "Stay out of sight until after elections, Frankie. . . . You won't have to be afraid of no one-to-twenty rap if you can stick it out till November" (318). In 1948, the fate of the Old Left in Cold War America was equally bound up with election year politics. Former Vice

President and New Dealer Henry Wallace's 1948 presidential run on the Progressive Party ticket (a party organized around a coalition of leftist groups, including the Communist Party) represented, in the words of Communist writer Howard Fast, "the final effort of the left-liberal-labor alliance that had been so vital and important a factor in American life since the days of Eugene V. Debs" (191). The Progressive Party advocated peace with Soviet Russia, and its platform included such positions as the abolition of Jim Crow segregation, civil rights, national healthcare, and public ownership of certain industries. However, the Wallace campaign was hampered by continuous red-baiting, intimidation, and mob violence. Wallace won only a little over a million votes and no electoral votes, finishing behind President Truman, Thomas Dewey, and Dixiecrat candidate Strom Thurmond (Culver and Hyde 481, 464-70, 501). Henry Wallace, and the last remnants of the 1930s Communist Old Left failed, like Frankie and Molly, to "stick it out till November."<sup>8</sup>

According to Bettina Drew, Algren began working for the Wallace campaign in February of 1948 (Drew 189-90). In an "Open Letter to Soviet Writers," which Algren signed with many other Communist-affiliated writers in May of 1948, the pro-Wallace camp condemned, in memorable terms, the Cold War politics of the American state. Paralleling the backwards glance of Algren's political allegory in *Golden Arm*, the letter declares: "The growing support for Wallace's candidacy among American cultural workers shows that they have a memory for their history. . . . Our working class has fought over and over again for human progress. We shall never forget this, nor let our nation sink into the swamp of fascism." Now, the same "bankers who financed Hitler" intend to "plant the dragon's teeth of our bayonets in every land and have our young men spring out of that bitter ground. Uranium volcanoes spout in their dreams to enflame the earth. Brains of metal, hearts like dried peas, what honest man among us can vindicate such people?" ("American Message" 4-5). The letter thus gives us the historically-specific sociopolitical stakes behind the following lyrical rumination in *Golden Arm*:

Hearts shaped like valentines aren't at all the fashion. What is more in demand are hearts with a bit of iron—and a twist to the iron at that. A stream-lined heart, say, with a claw like a hammer's claw, better used for ripping than for tapping at old repairs—that's what's needed to get by these days. It's the new style in hearts. The non-corrugated kind don't wear well any longer. (226)

Like the human, sensual, interpersonal bond of Molly and Frankie's relationship, the Wallace campaign—as a final articulation of the spirit of 1930s radical collectivism—is defeated by the conformist, militarist social structure, the “iron hearts,” of the Cold War era. Wallace was crushed in an electoral landslide virtually guaranteed after the repressions of his campaign; in *Golden Arm*, state violence shatters a romantic relationship that is figuratively loaded with collective, interracial, pro-peace, and utopian political significances. The aura of defeat and gloom that pervades *Golden Arm* is, in significant part, the aura of leftist political disappointment.

However, the novel doesn't end with Frankie's suicide, but with the documentary rendition of the coroner's inquest into Frankie's death. From the lyricism of the narrative we move to the bureaucratic functionality of official language. In this document, the characters interviewed—Antek and Molly—withhold information from the proceedings. Antek, for instance, denies that Frankie did morphine. He deflects questions about Frankie's psychological state or about his drug use and instead gestures toward the origins of Frankie's plight in social overdetermination: Frankie had “*too much* domestic trouble, *too many* bills, *too much* beer, that's all” (335, emphasis added). Molly insists that the only thing wrong with Frankie was that he “worried all the time, no work, sorry for things he'd done, blaming himself, all like that.” When the coroner threatens Molly with the charge of being an accessory to Frankie's crime, she clams up: “Are you trying me here, Coroner? If not I'd rather let the lawyers decide in court” (337-8). Due to the careful way in which Molly and Antek present Frankie, any mention of his addiction is kept from the official record. They keep the secret of drug use's symbolic significance—i.e., an act by which one can provisionally confront the social in the name of a transformative politics—away from the gaze of the state and keep politics away from the repressions, co-options, and recordings of power. Antek and Molly practice a double concealment: they conceal the fact of Frankie's addiction, referring instead to the social condition that his addiction figured. But they also conceal the figuratively empowering charge of addiction, keeping Frankie's habit from being (re)defined by the public record as pathology or failure of will. This figurative resource of the lumpenproletariat is preserved by Molly and Antek for future use. The novel ends with the coroner's verdict

(that Frankie committed suicide while “temporarily insane”) and his injunction to “[c]lose the case,” but this is only an ironic finality (338).

*Golden Arm* really ends with Algren’s secret reminder to the informed reader (who has picked up on and followed the novel’s political allegory) that the lumpenproletariat remains a source of literary political potential. The social realms of the lumpen contain materials for innovative, self-reinventing, contingent literary practice, materials awaiting the efforts of a Marxist writer who wants to “do it the hard way.” As the writer Robert Lowry explained to Algren after reading *Golden Arm*, the novel’s figurative social analyses, and its ethos of human collectivity, survive Frankie’s defeat: “The book is so good, so big, so much a complete achievement in one way—the way of never wrapping up that Division Street world but presenting it by some kind of magic that suspends it in mid-air and allows it to be viewed from all sides—that it couldn’t be as good in another. Meaning I didn’t die with Frankie Machine. I didn’t hang there with him. You made me care about everybody” (To Nelson Algren).

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> For an account of how Otto Preminger’s film version challenged the provisions of Hollywood’s Production Code (which revises some perceptions of Preminger as a heroic, Code-defying rebel), see Simmons.

<sup>2</sup> To varying degrees, this estimation can be found in nearly every critical engagement with Algren’s work. Most recently, Robert Ward’s introduction to a 2007 volume of essays on Algren distinguishes “the years from 1942 to 1956” as “the finest period of his work” (11), and *Somebody in Boots* receives no significant treatment in any essay in the volume. In *Confronting the Horror*, James Giles proposes an evolution in Algren’s career from a 1930s naturalism in which social and environmental determinants were predominant, to his postwar work which, according to Giles, reinvents naturalism by infusing it with existentialist concepts, attributing determination to internal or psychological factors. The post-1930s writings are periodized by Giles as “the major phase of his [Algren’s] career” (4). Giles is not unaware of political and socioeconomic concerns in *Golden Arm*, but he downplays them in favor of what he sees as the novel’s more powerful existentialist investments. For earlier bifurcations of Algren’s sociopolitical and aesthetic investments, see Bluestone, Eisinger, and Grebstein. Carlo Rotella also partakes in this tendency. He locates *Golden Arm* as one of Algren’s works which “move from the urgent contemporaneity of social critique toward the retrospective, elegiac mood of the decline narrative” (20). Correspondingly, for Rotella, Algren’s “best” and “mature” texts are his 1940s narratives of Polish Chicago that document the break-up of urban neighborhood space in the postindustrial era (66-7).

The contemporary critic who has most often posited the *continuity* of Algren’s political priorities in his post-1930s work is Ian Peddie. Peddie insists that Algren’s “social vision of amelioration for the underclass never wavered” (“The Wrong Side of Town” 24), and he has pursued this vision of Algren’s in multiple incisive essays. He argues that *Golden Arm* is continuous with “the social-protest tradition of the 1930s” and “represents the American literary Left’s need to alter its response to the changing times” (“Textual Outlaws” 111). While my study of *Golden Arm* certainly seconds this conclusion, Peddie reads this continuity through postcolonial theories and problems. Similarly, in a 2001 essay Peddie tracks a concern with the intersection of race, ethnicity, and class, and the operations of capitalist and colonialist

power structures, across Algren's works ("Poles Apart?"). Recently, he has proposed that Algren's postwar writing "connects the ideals of the old left with many of the issues with which the civil rights movement and New Left were preoccupied" ("The Wrong Side of Town" 37).

<sup>3</sup> For example, Marcus Boon cites Algren's novel as an example of post-World War II narratives "describing a return of the narcotic menace in a new form, that of the delinquent youth," a body of texts which "featured addicts as a biological type" (73-4). However, Frankie is not a "youth" but a veteran of the war whose troubles are those of an adult. Morphine is not depicted sensationally as a social "menace" in the novel, and there is no suggestion that Frankie's habit is innate or biological. To cite another example, David T. Courtwright, in his authoritative history of opiate use in the United States, invokes Frankie as an archetypal "hustling, poker-dealing junkie," a description from which the sociopolitical significance of Frankie's addiction has been abstracted (1). The substantial revisions made to Algren's novel, and to the characterization of Frankie, by Preminger's film may be in part responsible for misreadings of this sort. For an account of the ramifications of the film's revisions, see Rosen.

<sup>4</sup> The line comes from Whitman's poem "You Felons on Trial in Courts," from the *Autumn Rivulets* section of *Leaves of Grass*. It also serves as the epigraph for *Never Come Morning*.

<sup>5</sup> The conviction that Algren's human compassion for the poor and oppressed takes the place of intellectual or cognitive acuity can be found in criticism both hostile and friendly to Algren. Gertrude Buckman's review of *Never Come Morning* in *Partisan Review* is more or less typical of the former. She complains of Algren's "maudlin," "painfully sentimental" scenes of lower-class life and compares him unfavorably to Brecht and Céline, authors who "have a point of view informed by significant ideas and by a width of perception which nothing in Algren suggests" (427, 428). James Giles, drawing on existentialism to inform his reading of Algren's compassion, proposes that his 1930s "faith" in political solutions to the plight of the lumpenproletariat gradually shifted, in his post-Depression work, to "harsh compassion" for his subjects. While defending Algren's compassion (and giving it some philosophical grounding), Giles nevertheless positions it opposite to what he sees as the political-epistemological work, the "anthropological explorations," of social-protest writing (22-3).

<sup>6</sup> Althusser's theory of the overdetermined structure in dominance is developed in the chapters "Contradiction and Overdetermination" and "On the Materialist Dialectic" in *For Marx*, and in "The Errors of Classical Economics: An Outline for a Concept of Historical Time" in *Reading Capital*.

<sup>7</sup> In *Somebody in Boots*, the relationship between Cass McKay and Norah Egan is similar to that of Frankie and Molly's in that it also represents an attempt to create a refuge from socioeconomic inequity, and is thus inflected with utopian, post-capitalist tones. Algren seems to have wanted to underscore the allegorical significance of his protagonists' domestic relationships by drawing on the association of interracialism with Communism. Hence, in the early drafts of *Golden Arm*, Frankie's lover was a mulatto woman, and *High-Yellow and the Dealer* was one of his working titles (Drew 173, 185). There is no immediately clear reason why he ultimately opted against this choice for *Golden Arm*, but in his next novel, *A Walk on the Wild Side* (1956), Hallie Breedlove, the equivalent of Molly Novotny and Norah Egan, is part African American.

<sup>8</sup> For a history of the 1948 Wallace campaign, see Curtis D. MacDougall's three-volume study *Gideon's Army*.

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## Chapter 4

### **Ralph Ellison, the Lumpenproletariat, and *Slick*: The Development of an American Marxism**

In June of 1933, only a few months before Nelson Algren would hit the rails and return to Texas to start writing *Somebody in Boots*, twenty-year-old Ralph Ellison hopped a freight train out of Oklahoma City. Unlike Algren, Ellison didn't yet think of himself as a writer: he was bound for Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to study music. Yet like Algren, he was constrained by material circumstances. His father had died in 1916, and his mother Ida struggled throughout Ellison's childhood to make ends meet with domestic work. As he entered adulthood during the onset of the Great Depression, his financial prospects weren't improved. While waiting on his acceptance to Tuskegee, Ellison desperately contemplated his few options: suicide, joining the Civilian Conservation Corps (a New Deal work program), or playing in a minstrel band. When his acceptance came through, Ellison lacked the resources to travel to Tuskegee, so he hopped a train (Rampersad 44-49). He was only on the rails for about four days, but Ellison's experience among the lumpenproletariat would be just as formative in his literary practice as Algren's transient adventures were in his own work.

We don't usually think of Ellison alongside Algren, Tom Kromer, Edward Dahlberg, Edward Newhouse, Edward Anderson, or other 1930s "bottom dogs" writers of the lumpenproletariat. Walter Rideout's account of these writers as "ambush[ing] the reader from behind a relentlessly objective depiction of life in the lower depths" hardly puts one in mind of the controlled fiction of Ellison (185). And despite the salient interest in the lumpenproletariat of Ellison's long-time friend and sparring partner Richard Wright,<sup>1</sup> the concept has not been employed in critical discussions of Ellison. For one, there are few typical instances of lumpenproletarian content in his fiction. Two 1930s stories of transients, based on his trip to Tuskegee, were published after his death ("Hymie's Bull" and "I Did Not Learn Their Names" appeared in the 1996 collection

*Flying Home*), but none of his works explicitly foregrounds the lumpen to the extent of *Native Son*, *Waiting for Nothing*, or *Somebody in Boots*. Further, Ellison's well-known disaffiliation from Wright, and his critique of Wright's lumpenproletarian figure Bigger Thomas in essays like "The World and the Jug" (1963-64) would seem to definitively distance Ellison from the Depression-era lumpen literary milieu. Apart from some lumpenproletarian resonances of *Invisible Man*'s Rinehart and zoot suiters, Ellison would seem to have missed the fascination with Marxism's "rotting mass" that at one point or another captivated the literary interest of many of his leftist contemporaries.

In this chapter, I rely on the concept of the lumpenproletariat to argue for the distinctly Marxist character of Ellison's work. Contrary to nearly all critical narratives of Ellison's politics, I insist that Ellison's Marxism must be understood as relatively autonomous from his Communist commitments. Ellison, we know, renounces Communism in the 1940s. I argue, however, that the *Marxist* structures of thought and practice internal to his writing have a life of their own distinct from his transactions with the Communist Party and, furthermore, that his Marxism incorporates the very mechanisms of institutional critique that would lead to his disaffiliation with the institution of American Communism.<sup>2</sup> To delineate the particular terms of Ellison's singular Marxism, I reconstruct his understanding of socioeconomic structure and political action, which he formulated in dialogue with African-American Communist discourse in the 1930s. In his grasp of the relation of theory to concrete situated praxis, Ellison was in the forefront of Marxist thought as it existed in the cultural arenas of the Old Left. In fact, it is only after the theoretical clarifications of Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci that we can fully appreciate the Marxist initiatives Ellison was figuring out in his fiction, criticism, and journalism.

Ellison and Marxism is, of course, a counterintuitive pairing. Ellison himself claimed that he was only briefly drawn to "Marxist political theory" as a youthful "attraction." In 1965, he asserted that even though he had written for Communist-backed journals in the 1930s and 1940s and produced "propaganda having to do with the Negro struggle," he "never wrote the official type of fiction" (*Collected Essays* 58, 746). As Larry Neal put it in an influential essay: "As far as I can perceive, Ellison had never really internalized Marxism in the first place. . . . [L]ucky for us, his work never took on

the simplistic assertions of the literary Marxist” (60). Accordingly, Ellison scholarship has often distinguished an essential Ellison of *Invisible Man* (1952) and the essays collected in *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986), from an unsophisticated, still-developing Communist Ellison of the 1930s and early 1940s. My reading of Ellison goes against the grain of such critical narratives about Ellison and his work that he himself played a role in fashioning. What would it mean, then, to read Ralph Ellison as an American Marxist, as a writer who, across his career, struggled to craft a theory of social ontology and transformative political possibility adequate to the complexities of American culture and society? How can we approach his writings in such a way as to position him as an American, and African-American, interlocutor in the theoretical conversations of Western Marxism? To answer these questions is my object in the first half of this chapter.

The second half of the chapter offers a reading of *Slick*, a novel Ellison started in 1937-1938 but ultimately abandoned by 1939 (though an episode from the manuscript was published as the story “Slick Gonna Learn” in *Direction* in 1939, Ellison’s first published work of fiction). Drawing on the theoretical paradigms and vocabulary introduced in the first part of the chapter, I read *Slick* as offering a complex theory of American capitalism and political practice in literary, figurative form. *Slick*, although unfinished, stands as one of the Depression’s most singular endeavors, an effort to bring Marxism to bear on specific American conditions without relying on pieties of the proletariat or the historical inevitability of revolution. As a novel attempting to synthesize Marxism with the marginality of the lumpenproletariat, the positivity of black folk identity, the contradiction between economic labor and sexual reproduction, the ethics of Jim Crow, the complexities of American modernity, and psychological theories of human action, *Slick* warrants our attention on the grounds of its sheer ambition alone. It is Ellison’s attempt to solve, from the vantage point of Depression America, the fundamental problem of Marxism, which Lenin famously framed in 1902 as “what is to be done?”

### **Marxism, Communism, and the Two Ralph Ellisons**

First, we need to diagnose some obstacles that the body of literary scholarship devoted to Ellison has posed to our ability to situate him within Marxism. Broadly speaking, there are three: a tendency to conflate Marxism with the American Communist Party; a conviction that there are actually two Ralph Ellisons; and finally, the assumption that Ellison's emphasis on the *complexity* of American society and culture is an irredeemably liberal-pluralist renunciation of "Marxist" approaches.

The notion of the two Ralph Ellisons—a radical Ellison of the 1930s and early 1940s, and a liberal humanist, high-modernist (or, for some critics, African-American folk artist) Ellison of the 1950s—is prevalent in Ellison criticism.<sup>3</sup> The distinction generally gets understood, depending on one's leanings, in terms of the simplicity (or political purposiveness) of the earlier Ellison's work as compared to the complexity (or political quiescence) of the later Ellison's. To cite an example, Robert O'Meally writes that "Ellison's artistic vision is always ironical, complex, ambiguous" in part because it avoids the "easy answers" of political partisanship: Ellison raises social and cultural problems that "slice against the grain of black and white nationalism, of Marxism, and of social science. . . . They spring, though, from the writer's discipline and from his ironical perspective" (*Craft* 4-5). O'Meally is clearly under the assumption that the distinction between a radical Ellison and a liberal democratic Ellison is a distinction between (misguided, wrong) simplicity and (wise, insightful) complexity, both in Ellison's understanding of sociopolitical issues and in his literary craft. Further, O'Meally implies that Marxism is a simplistic proposition, a matter of policy rather than a "complex" theoretical system.

The scholar who most values and most seriously analyzes Ellison's Communist period is Barbara Foley. Her 2010 study *Wrestling with the Left* recovers a startling array of published and unpublished materials that demonstrate the extent and seriousness of Ellison's Communist commitment and its role in shaping Ellison's aesthetic and political thought.<sup>4</sup> Even though Foley agrees that the early Ellison eventually renounced radicalism (becoming a Cold War liberal and patriotic American apologist), she argues that he was only able to do so unevenly, and that his Communist past exerted residual influences he struggled to suppress in drafting *Invisible Man* as a conservative, anti-Communist novel. While I am sympathetic to the politics of Foley's important project, I

find that her understanding of Marxism in Ellison's work is largely defined in historical and institutional terms as alignment with the specific policies and views of the Communist Party of the United States (African-American self-determination, anti-fascism, Popular Front discourse, World War II strategy, etc.). In seeking a general *theoretical* Marxism in Ellison, however, I hope to build on Foley's achievement in returning the question of Ellison and radicalism to serious scholarly consideration.

Jesse Wolfe, then, concurs with most Ellison critics when he writes that Ellison's love of "the fluidity and unpredictability of American democracy" is a "patriotic American, and anti-totalitarian, impulse [that] was a constant throughout Ellison's career," one that leads him to reject the dogmatic reductionism of Communism (626). However, I see that impulse as not confined to Cold War liberalism or espousals of American democracy, but as a fundamentally Marxist proposition, even if it emphasizes social and cultural factors over class-based economic ones in describing American reality. Althusser and Gramsci demonstrate that Marxism takes the irreducible complexity of the social as its starting point. These thinkers theorize a concrete given social situation not by simplifying it, not by reducing it to the dyadic binary of an underlying economic class struggle, but by engaging with it *as* complex and resistant to reduction. Althusser is very clear that social unevenness and fluidity make revolution possible: "It is this interplay, this unevenness, which allow us to understand that something real can happen in a social formation and that through the political class struggle it is possible to get a hold on real history" ("Is it Simple" 220). As we'll see, for both Althusser and Gramsci, the complexity—what Ellison calls the "chaos"<sup>5</sup>—of the social makes it, and not the economic, the practical terrain of class struggle. Consequently—and here Ellison, Althusser, and Gramsci agree—to reduce the complexity of the social whole to a *simple* explanatory model of infrastructural class struggle is neither epistemological nor Marxist: "Marx does not only deny us the ability to delve down beneath this complex whole," writes Althusser, "but also . . . he demonstrates that far from being original, in determinate conditions, simplicity is merely the product of the complex process" ("On the Materialist Dialectic" 195-96). The social is ontologically and originally complex, and simplifying accounts of its composition or structure are epistemologically faulty. Althusser is taking aim at vulgar Marxism's

economistic tendency: to reduce actual social complexity to the terms of a determining, stable economic field, he argues, is to lose the ability to understand the social adequately, to find the real possibilities for political action that emerge within it. In his oft-cited essay “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance,” Stuart Hall argues that Gramsci’s and Althusser’s interventions, since they stress the need for Marxist theory to address historically specific contexts, are especially applicable to the socioeconomic complexity of non-European, post-colonial societies (47). In their approach to the social totality as historically and nationally specific and internally complex, Althusser and Gramsci constitute what Hall called, in 1980, a “new theoretical paradigm” in Marxism (50).<sup>6</sup> Within literature, however, Ellison anticipated that paradigm and developed its applicability to American contexts.

### **The Lumpenproletariat, the Folk, and Revolutionary Politics**

In the first section of this chapter, I take a step back from the main narratives of Ellison scholarship to offer a new way of reading Ellison’s problematic—the undergirding structure of his thought and writing—as one that thrives on complexity as a guiding epistemological assumption and is engaged in characteristically Marxist theoretical production. Grasping the terms of this problematic will be essential to understanding the sophisticated theoretical work Ellison was enacting in *Slick*.

My organizing framework for describing this problematic is the young Ellison’s 1933 journey from his home in Oklahoma City to Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. On the way, he had a racially-charged, terrifying encounter with railroad bulls in Decatur, Alabama. The very *narrative form* of this 1933 journey—its sequence of movement through three spatial levels (Oklahoma City, Decatur, and Tuskegee)—encodes the problematic of Ellison’s Marxism. I am not arbitrarily foregrounding this trip. Ellison would return to all three of these stages after the fact, recalling them in ways that implicitly accord them a theoretically-generative significance. Thus, to read Ellison’s Marxism we need to attend not so much to the facts of his biography, but to the way he understood, reflected on, and continued to live with the memory of those facts.

Ellison’s four days among the lumpenproletariat contribute to the prominence of the lumpenproletariat in his literary practice. Like Algren did in *Somebody in Boots*,

Ellison puts the social marginalization of the lumpen to work as a conceptual component of his Marxism, but unlike the Depression-era Algren, he reverses Marx's valuation of that marginalization. As we know, given the logic of Marx's economic determinism, because the lumpen are not an economic class involved in material production, they have no *stable* sociopolitical place. Therefore Marx considered them necessarily self-interested, resistant to revolutionary organization, and prone to reactionary co-option in the class struggle (Draper 2309). Ellison, on the other hand, uses the concept of the lumpenproletariat to think the complex fluidity of the social as something other than the simple reflection of the economic. Ellison anticipates poststructuralist readings of the lumpen by Peter Stallybrass and Jacques Rancière, who read the lumpen as a symptom, internal to Marxism's conceptual topography, of the fluid heterogeneity of the social and the attendant necessity of politics. Unlike Marx, Ellison thought that the very social dislocation of the lumpen made them more likely to act against structural domination. To think that form of politics, Ellison would combine the lumpenproletariat with a concept of African-American folk identity. Not a bid for racial authenticity, Ellison's folk concept is associated with an irreducible essence of human (political) agency. In his fiction and essays, "lumpen-folk" characters, who retain a capacity for action precisely due to their (dis)location within the nebulous interstices of the social, personify the chances of revolutionary politics. Grasping the social as ontologically fluid, and understanding politics as a process of organizing essential and unavoidable human acts against power, are the twin poles of Ellison's Marxist problematic.

*Oklahoma City (The Social)*

In 1933, Ellison left behind Oklahoma City, which he would recall as representative of the general ontology of American society. In Arnold Rampersad's words, "[h]e believed that the region possessed or had possessed almost every element concerning power, race, and art that is essential to understanding the nation" (4-5). Ellison's recollections would be the form in which he theorized the ontology of the American social structure. In his 1964 essay "Hidden Name and Complex Fate," he offers a lengthy account of the diversity of black life in segregated Oklahoma City. The theme of this account is familiar to Ellison's readers: the restrictions of Jim Crow do not

absolutely stifle black expression and opportunity. The same city in which Ellison found “card[s] warning Negroes away from the polls” is also the city in which he was able to read Shaw and Maupassant “in the home of a friend whose parents were products of that stream of New England education which had been brought to Negroes by the young and enthusiastic white teachers who staffed the schools set up for the freedmen after the Civil War.” And alongside canonical modernism, there were “the churches, the schoolyards, the barbershops, the cotton-picking camps—places where folklore and gossip thrived.”

Ellison goes on to list the elements of Oklahoma City that imprinted themselves on his consciousness:

I was claimed by weather, by speech rhythms, by Negro voices and their different idioms, . . . by music, by tight spaces and by wide spaces in which the eyes could wander, by death, by newly born babies, by manners of various kinds, company manners and street manners, the manners of white society and those of our own society. . . . By parades, public dances and jam sessions, Easter sunrise ceremonies and large funerals. By contests between fire-and-brimstone preachers and by presiding elders who got “laughing-happy” when moved by the spirit of God.

I was impressed by expert players of the “dozens” and certain notorious bootleggers of corn whiskey. By jazz musicians and fortunetellers and by men who did anything well. . . . I was fascinated by old ladies, those who had seen slavery and those who were defiant of white folk and black alike, by the enticing walks of prostitutes and by the limping walks affected by Negro hustlers. . . .

And there was the Indian-Negro confusion. There were Negroes who were part Indian and who lived on reservations, and Indians who had children who lived in towns as Negroes. . . . There were certain Jews, Mexicans, Chinese cooks, a German orchestra conductor and an English grocer who owned a Franklin touring car. And certain Negro mechanics—“Cadillac Slim,” “Sticks” Walker, Buddy Bunn and Oscar Pitman—who had so assimilated the automobile that they seemed to be behind a steering wheel even as they walked the streets or danced with girls. And there were the whites who despised us and the others who shared our hardships and our joys. (*Collected Essays* 200-202)

At the end of this long catalogue (much abbreviated here), Ellison laconically remarks “this is sufficient to indicate some of what was present even in a segregated community to form the background of my work and my sense of life” (202). He gives us a portrait of social life as ultimately determined by the material power arrangements of Jim Crow but also culturally vibrant and, above all, diverse and differentiated. The black community of Oklahoma City is temporally as well as culturally uneven. The legacy of Reconstruction—defeated in 1876 and supplanted by Jim Crow—is residually present in

the family that introduced Ellison to modernist literature. Auto mechanics not only dwell among preachers and fortunetellers but bear folkloric personas themselves. The uneven development of American history produces social incongruities (Reconstruction/Jim Crow, folk/modern, Native American/African American) whose materiality as multivalent sites of contradiction troubles the logic of official power arrangements. “Anything and everything was to be found in the chaos of Oklahoma,” he wrote elsewhere (*Collected Essays* 50). Indeed, Ellison’s famous critiques of sociological approaches to American social issues are grounded precisely in this point: any approach to society that does not consider its internally-differentiated complexity reproduces the apparent *inevitability* of that society’s structure by occluding internal sites of difference, disruption, and possible change.

Preserving that possibility for politics is Althusser’s intention in theorizing the social as an overdetermined structure in dominance. He conducted this intervention against orthodox Marxism’s reduction of the social to an undifferentiated expression of economic relations. A proper reading of Marx, Althusser insisted, would discredit this reductionism as Hegelian and ideological: the properly Marxist approach to the social understands it as substantive in its own right. Althusser’s social is a set of relatively autonomous sites of practical activity, related to each other yet related unevenly, by difference and distance. The economic, for Althusser, is still ultimately determinative of the social, but in two distinct ways. First, it is not prior to or “below” (the topographical implication of the base/superstructure model) the social but one site among others, integrated within the social totality. Second, its determination consists of—and is nothing other than—the sum total of uneven determinative relations between *all* sites of the social (Althusser’s signature, anti-originary concept of “structural causality” names this immanent determination of the social). The economic determines, in other words, to the extent that it unifies social relations into a diverse unity: it constitutes the relative component of their relative autonomy.

Consequently, Althusser holds that it is impossible to think class struggle in any pure economic sense: “production without society, that is, without social relations,” Althusser writes, “exists nowhere” (“On the Materialist Dialectic” 205). Class struggle is viscerally available and visible only in socially articulated forms. This claim is a point of

substantial agreement between Althusser and Gramsci, and it helps us to see the Marxist dimensions of literary texts, such as Ellison's, that are not narratives of industrial class conflict.

In what can be read as a theoretical elaboration of Ellison's claims about Oklahoma City, Althusser describes the social as overdetermined because its determination consists of the unity of *all* these irregular, variously-related determinations at work among its component levels. Because it is *overdetermined*, any social site exists in potential *excess* of its hegemonic function. The excess of overdetermination—the irreducibility of the social to the pure expression and function of ruling class domination—makes revolutionary politics possible. As Alain Badiou explains, “[o]verdetermination puts the possible on the agenda” and is, for Althusserianism, “the political place” (65). In other words, the social still generally functions in the name of the ruling class—it is a structure *in dominance*—but there are vital gaps, lags, and contradictions between the fact of that domination and its operation in any overdetermined social site. Those spaces of difference make the social the place where something new can happen (political or otherwise), in much the same way, for example, that the differential residue of Reconstruction in a Jim Crow society afforded Ellison access to modernist literature.

For Ellison, power-defying collectivity across social and ideological barriers can emerge in the overdetermined places of the social. Following his fascination with Oklahoma City's “Negro mechanics,” Ellison often imagines these moments through the figurative motivation of technological objects. In a 1961 interview, Ellison recalls “the accidents through which so much of that world beyond the Negro community became available to me” in Oklahoma City. As an example, he offers an encounter from his childhood with a white boy named Hoolie. Ellison's family was living in a white neighborhood, and Ellison was fascinated by radios. He spent his time searching through the trash for “cylindrical ice-cream cartons which were used by amateurs for winding tuning coils.” One day, he met Hoolie, who sought the same cartons, and they struck up a brief friendship. “I moved back into the Negro community,” Ellison remembers, “and began to concentrate on music, and was never to see him again, but knowing this white boy was a very meaningful experience. It had little to do with the race question as such,

but with our mutual loneliness . . . and a great curiosity about the growing science of radio” (*Collected Essays* 63-4). The theme of this memory—a generative and sustaining encounter, mediated by technological objects, across racial lines—would be repeated in Ellison’s 1930s fiction. The technological products of modern industrial capitalism—cars, radios, airplanes—can symbolize the given nature of the social as porous to political opportunity *because* all of its components are complexly related. As it does for young Ralph and Hoolie, the presence of technology in Ellison’s fiction draws characters and situations out of their isolation and brings them into contact with other characters and other situations from the vast, diverse social fabric. Technology affords access to the social totality, an access that often serves as the precondition for the formation of interracial, revolutionary collective alliances. That Ellison uses modern technology to mark this movement indicates that he understands the possibility of such alliances, and their political potential, to be inherent in the specific nature of capitalism as a modern, industrial mode of production.<sup>7</sup>

For example, one of Ellison’s earliest ventures in fiction is “A Party Down at the Square,” the story of a lynching in a small Southern town as witnessed and narrated by a naively racist white youth.<sup>8</sup> The lynching is interrupted by an airplane whose pilot, seeing the light of the blaze on the Square through the pouring rain, mistakes it for the runway lights of the nearby airport and starts to make a landing. The pilot corrects his mistake in time, but the plane’s landing gear knocks over power lines, electrocuting a white woman. The lynching is resumed and carried off, but it gives rise to some curious after-effects. The narrator reports that afterwards, the town’s blacks “look mean as hell when you pass them down at the store.” Additionally, white sharecroppers are grasping materialist critiques of the laws of white domination: “it didn’t do no good to kill the niggers ‘cause things don’t get no better” says one who, according to the narrator, “looked hungry as hell.” Finally, the airline has launched an official investigation into the event “to find who set the fire that almost wrecked their plane” (*Flying Home* 11).

The event of the airplane’s descent produces critical responses to reified laws of racial domination and prepares the ground for an anti-racist and anti-capitalist alliance between the “mean” African Americans and the grumbling white sharecroppers. Its descent moves the localized practice of lynching into contradictory relationship with the

social totality: as the pre-modern atmosphere of lynching is contradicted by the modernity of the airplane, the local practice of Jim Crow is contradicted by broader material deprivations of capitalism. As a result, what occurs is not a smooth reproduction and naturalization of white power but an event whose atypicality catalyzes possible political transformation. It is not a union organizer or Communist militant who creates this event, but the overdetermined nature of the social itself—capitalism has made it possible for anti-capitalist awareness to emerge in the most unlikely places of the social landscape. Without denying the facts of racism and economic exploitation, Ellison insists on the interior complexity of a social structure in which power relations are articulated, variant, and sometimes disrupted, where exclusively repressive determination becomes possibility-laden *overdetermination*. This “chaos” of American society is both produced by capitalism and the source of anti-capitalist possibilities.

*Decatur, Alabama (The Political)*

Ellison’s 1933 trip provided a terrifying yet instructive instance, which he remembered the rest of his life, of politics. Fundamental to Ellison’s notion of politics is that the social, not the economic, is the place of revolutionary struggle. The objective possibilities for historical change offered by shifts in the economic mode of production are viscerally available to political organization and strategy only as social, ideological, or cultural phenomena. In order to situate this non-economist (yet ultimately economically-determined) understanding of revolution within Marxism, we need to supplement Althusser’s understanding of social formation with some illuminating concepts of Antonio Gramsci’s. Here, I hope to show that not only has Ellison anticipated something like a Gramscian understanding of political process, but that he has done so from a particularly African-American Communist perspective.

Althusser and Gramsci are Western Marxism’s foremost thinkers of the political (as opposed to the aesthetic, or the form of dialectic, or the cultural). The entire point of Althusser’s social theory is to provide a conceptual apparatus adequate to the heart of Marxism: political practice and its central concept of the *conjuncture*. The conjuncture—a concept that Althusser names but finds implicit in Lenin’s writings on the 1917 Russian Revolution—is the immediate concrete givenness of a particular social situation in its

temporal and geographic specificity. Concepts like the structure articulated in dominance, structural causality, and overdetermination are all intended to enable the Marxist to see the social as a conjuncture. Marxist politics must grasp the conjuncture without reference or recourse to assumptions about the form it *ought* to take—Althusser’s social theory is both materialist *and* anti-foundational. The goal of Marxist political theory is to find in a given conjuncture “the essential articulations, the interconnexions, the strategic nodes on which the possibility and the fate of any revolutionary practice [depend]” (“On the Materialist Dialectic” 178). These nodes are potentially found within any relation of social sites, and in any articulated form; if one looks for them only in factories or in union meetings, Althusser implies, one is not being a materialist. Gramsci, however, pays closer attention than Althusser to the processes *through* which these nodes and articulations become chances for politics. Gramsci offers three concepts that are thus helpful for reading Ellison’s Marxism: the historical bloc, the conjunctural (somewhat different from Althusser’s conjunctural), and catharsis.

For Gramsci, the historical bloc is not an object, but the *form* that certain objects (society, the human subject, and the relation between intellectuals and masses) take. It describes the structure of an object as a historically-specific, complex set of relations. In terms of the social, this means that the economic infrastructure, and the sociopolitical and cultural superstructures, are not arranged in a direct determinative relationship, but rather form a “complex, contradictory and discordant *ensemble*” (*Selections* 366). Elsewhere, he defines the social historical bloc as the “interrelated and reciprocal” development of the economic and social structures, “reality itself in movement” (*Gramsci Reader* 193).

Gramsci proposes that a social historical bloc contains various movements and sites of struggle. Marxist theory must examine the social historical bloc to distinguish “organic” (meaning economic) from “conjunctural” (here meaning superstructural—the equivalent concept in Gramsci to Althusser’s conjuncture is the historical bloc) movements. “Organic” movements are long-term shifts and developments in the economic mode of production. Generally, these are only fully understood with the benefit of hindsight: they are the objective economic reality of a given historical period that can only be seen after the fact. Political struggle, however, occurs in the superstructure, on the more uncertain “terrain of the ‘conjunctural.’” For “organic” and “conjunctural,” we

might substitute “economic” and “sociocultural,” “essential” and “contingent,” even “reality” and “appearance.” But Gramsci does not intend to dismiss the conjunctural as inessential. Rather, the fluid, contingent space of the social—which is one step removed from the organic economic “reality” of a given social historical bloc—is where the objective dynamics of the class struggle are *necessarily* articulated in non-economic forms (*Selections* 175-85).

Gramsci goes to no less of a source than Marx himself to insist on the necessity of the conjunctural. He reads Marx’s preface to *A Critique of Political Economy* as arguing that “men acquire consciousness of structural conflicts [ie, economic class conflicts] on the level of ideologies,” and that this claim of Marx’s is “an affirmation of epistemological and not simply psychological and moral value.” That is, the sociocultural or the ideological is where the economic class struggle is grasped, articulated, and fought out. Such struggles are still ultimately economically determined: for Gramsci, the presence of anti-capitalist movements in social or ideological form indicates that the economic “premisses exist one hundred per cent for this revolutionising” (*Selections* 365-66). Gramsci reassigns the actionable location of class struggle from the economic to the social, to movements and struggles that might not appear to be class-based, but that articulate and are made possible by economic conditions.

The process through which such social factors attain a transformative purchase—the manner in which they become truly revolutionary and challenge the organic mode of production itself—is described by Gramsci’s difficult concept of *catharsis*. Catharsis is “the passage from the purely economic . . . to the ethico-political moment, that is the superior elaboration of the [organic] structure into [conjunctural] superstructure in the minds of men.” When this occurs, the totality of the social (as ultimately economically organized) is no longer seen as “an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive” but is “transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives.” Creating this “‘cathartic’ moment” is the “starting-point” of Marxist politics (*Selections* 366-67). Catharsis is the moment when the objective, organic conditions of the social structure are cognitively re-appropriated as a source or catalyst for political resistance, when the possibility of revolutionary or “organic” change is articulated as a contingent political

project in the social. As Norberto Bobbio explains, “the very moment in which the material conditions are recognized, they become degraded to an instrument for whatever end is desired” (34). This cathartic recognition is vital to understanding the revolutionary stakes of Ellison’s literary appropriation of technology, or Ellison’s synecdochic stand-in for the determining given conditions of the totality. Further, since Gramsci describes catharsis in personal terms of conscious response, it is helpful for delineating the subjective routes through which Ellison’s characters come to revolutionary consciousness.

We can trace these Gramscian political mechanisms to Ellison’s own experience among the Depression lumpenproletariat. After hopping a freight in Oklahoma City, Ellison almost didn’t make it to Tuskegee. In Decatur, Alabama, railroad bulls seized him and other hoboes from their train. “Not only was I guilty of stealing passage on a freight train,” Ellison recalled, “but I realized that I had been caught in the act in the very town where, at that moment, the *Scottsboro* case was being tried” (*Collected Essays* 773). The famous case of the “Scottsboro Boys” had begun two years prior, when nine black male hoboes had been taken off a train by police and tried for the rape of two white female transients. Their case would quickly become a rallying point for the Communist Party, which provided legal representation for the Scottsboro boys and turned their defense into a national, anti-racist cause. Ellison had been following the case in the black press and saw it clearly as “a macabre circus, a kangaroo proceeding that would be soon followed by an enactment of the gory rite of lynching” (*Collected Essays* 773). In the Decatur freight yard, Ellison realized that some of his fellow hoboes were white women dressed as men, and he feared the worst (Rampersad 51). He was saved, however, by an interracial act of desperate resistance: “when a group of white boys broke and ran, I plunged into their midst.” He escaped, but the “fear, horror and sense of helplessness” he felt in Decatur “was most vivid in my mind,” he wrote in 1976, more than four decades later, “and it has so remained” (*Collected Essays* 773).

In Decatur, an accidental, spontaneous disruption of structural racist practice opens an exploitable fissure within that practice. Because he refuses to be a victim of Jim Crow, Ellison’s escape from the railroad bulls is a political act. It doesn’t *seem* to be a revolutionary anti-capitalist act, but this is because it is articulated in racial and gendered

terms. As Stuart Hall argues, following Gramsci and Althusser, “[r]ace is . . . the modality in which class is ‘lived,’ the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and ‘fought through’” (55). In Decatur, when white women and black men are taken off the train together, structural oppression takes the articulated form of Jim Crow’s race and gender-based prescriptions: capitalist violence is articulated as the ideological self-justification of the lyncher “punishing” a transgression at once racial and sexual. Ellison’s escape is a spontaneous act open to political organization, occurring in proximity to the Communist Party’s efforts to unite black and white under the red banner of revolution. Accordingly, the interraciality of the hoboes’ escape is highlighted in his recollection of the event. If we read his account of this event carefully, it seems to be a cathartic moment in Gramsci’s sense. The presence of white women in the event is at first the mark of the necessary, determining force of Jim Crow, but Ellison is drawn into political action by grasping the instrumental possibility of the presence of white men and women (perhaps some of those “white boys” who broke and ran were *also* white women dressed as men). In a moment of catharsis, the meaning of white and black *together* shifts from the mechanism through which Jim Crow will function—the “crime” of which he, like the Scottsboro boys, is “guilty”—to the grounds on which it will be resisted.

As this incident suggests, the lumpenproletariat, and not the organized industrial proletariat, is the subject of Ellison’s Marxism. This is because, in his writing, Ellison often understands the *social*—precisely because of its “chaotic” (overdetermined) topology—and not the economic, to be the place of possible revolutionary opportunity. The lumpen both inhabit that social fluidity as the very modality of marginal existence, and figure its political instrumentality. In this approach to the lumpen, Ellison is located within Marxist thought, and he anticipates poststructuralist re-readings of the lumpenproletariat’s significance for Marxism.

Peter Stallybrass and Jacques Rancière distance themselves from Marx’s contempt for the lumpenproletariat and instead read the lumpenproletariat as Marxism’s sign of political heterogeneity and possibility. Both base their readings in large part on Marx’s famous account of the 1848-1851 class struggle in France, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). In this text, Marx aims to explain how Louis-

Napoléon Bonaparte (Napoleon Bonaparte's nephew, who would rule as Napoleon III) came to power in France in an 1851 coup d'état despite not reflecting the material interests of any one of the classes locked in combat in the 1848-1851 conjuncture. It is a text in which Marx must confront the social and the political not as mere reflections of the economic, but as relatively autonomous processes. For Stallybrass, the role played by the Parisian lumpenproletariat in backing Bonaparte's seizure of power leads Marx to address "the domain of politics and the state as something other than reflection—as, in fact, a play (an often violent play) between heterogeneity and homogeneity. It is the problem of that play which Marx figures under the name of the lumpenproletariat" (91). Similarly, Jacques Rancière sees the events of 1848-51 as revealing "the inconsequence and inconsistency of classes as such" (95). Marx encounters this inconsistency (in 1848-51, no classes acted the way they "should have" according to Marx's economist model of history) and introduces the concept of the lumpenproletariat, a non-class that disrupts historical progress, to avoid facing it. The bitter contempt Marx loads on the lumpenproletariat is a symptom of the general impossibility of transposing, in theory, any contingent set of *social* individuals into world-historical *economic* idealities of bourgeoisie and proletariat. For Rancière, the lumpenproletariat is the remainder of heterogeneity, diversity, and mixture that deconstructs the idealist, pure categories of orthodox Marxism (90-100).

As my discussion of *Slick* will indicate, Ellison was familiar with *The Eighteenth Brumaire* in the 1930s. Marx's listing of the Parisian lumpen in this text resonates with Ellison's account of Oklahoma City. Marx intends scorn here, but Ellison would have seen an exciting heterogeneity:

Alongside decayed *roués* with doubtful means of subsistence and of doubtful origin, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jail-birds, escaped galley-slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaux*, brothel-keepers, porters, *literati*, organ-grinders, rag-pickers, knife-grinders, tinkers, beggars, in short the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass thrown hither and thither, which the French term *la Bohème*. (65)

Besides the inescapably fluid contours of lumpenproletarian identity itself, Marx's rhetoric implies a complex, chaotic social topology that the lumpen inhabit. If Bonaparte, regardless of the dictates of the economic, could exploit this chaos in order to suture a collective agent capable of seizing state power, Marx strongly (if inadvertently) suggests that effective revolutionary politics does the same, deriving from *within* the overdetermined social landscape as opposed to from within the factory.<sup>9</sup> Ellison may differ from Marx in his attitude about the lumpen, but his lumpenproletarian approach to literary production is grounded in the peculiar Marxist stakes of the concept.

The other mechanism of Ellison's political theory is a concept of the African-American folk, motivated in dialogue with Communist approaches to black folk identity in the 1930s. For Ellison, the folk is a source of positivity, an undeconstructible kernel of political will often—but not exclusively—associated with African Americans.<sup>10</sup> It signals ante-capitalist energies that can, within modern social conjunctures, be organized into anti-capitalist projects. Ellison's concept of the folk is his name for the positive kernels of resistance and sustenance that emerge in the nebulosity of American society. During the 1930s, Ellison and others in the African-American Communist left formulated a mobile, politically-instrumental Marxist theory of the folk.<sup>11</sup>

The Communist Party was crucially concerned with black folk culture in the 1930s. The Party's "Black Belt Thesis" described African Americans in the South as an oppressed nation and prioritized their struggle for self-determination. This was not a nationalist project, however. Party discourse defined the authenticity of Southern blacks—their folk identity—as working-class in nature, making their objective allies not the black middle class, but the white proletariat. The Communists thus worked with a de-racialized, de-essentialized deployment of black folk identity and black nationalism. They understood nations as historical rather than racially-essential formations and saw national struggles as articulated modes of resistance to capitalist imperialism. Hence, they sloganized authentic black cultural identity as "national in form, but proletarian in content" (Dawahare 74-6; Foley, *Radical* 184).

The Party's theoretical apparatus for correlating racial and class identity influenced African-American Communist writers in their approach to the African-American folk. Folklore's décor of authenticity was retained but reassigned—folk culture

was considered the authentic cultural expression of the black *masses*, and thus the articulated cultural mode of black revolutionary consciousness. Richard Wright's 1937 "Blueprint for Negro Writing," published in *New Challenge*, is the most famous articulation of folklore's importance for black leftist literature.<sup>12</sup> Wright describes black folk culture as a vital raw material for the committed black writer who must synthesize this pre-modern, nationalistic folk culture with modern, internationalist Marxist theory. The Communist writer Marian Minus (a friend of Wright and Ellison) advanced a similar argument a few months prior to the publication of Wright's essay. In "Present Trends of Negro Literature" (appearing in *Challenge*, the precursor to *New Challenge*) she insisted that black writers must reject the middle-class values of the 1920s New Negro movement and return to the "earthy, burning, vital forces" of a black folk culture that is the culture of the black masses. But the writer must *universalize* black folk culture, must link its rich expressive content to "the total configuration of world-wide human emotions, ideals and struggles." Minus locates effective African-American writing in the contradiction between residual folk culture and modern social realism, an aesthetic unevenness capable of generating revolutionary consciousness (10-11).

In his first journalistic publication, Richard Wright portrayed boxer Joe Louis as a folk hero capable of uniting blacks in revolutionary struggle. In the *New Masses* report "Joe Louis Uncovers Dynamite," Wright describes the mass celebration of blacks in the streets of Chicago following Louis's 1935 victory over Max Baer. In Wright's account, an accident of sports culture gives rise to a spontaneous collectivity. The celebrants grasp an emergent class consciousness as they storm a street car and take money that spills in the chaos: "They stole it from us, anyhow." Wright renders the collective consciousness of the crowd in free indirect discourse, showing how Louis's prowess makes him an avatar for the political potential of black folk: "We ain't scared either. We'll fight too when the time comes. We'll win, too" (19). Eventually the crowds are subdued by the police, but it is accidents like these, Wright argues, that unlock the inherent folk militancy of African Americans, a militancy personified by Joe Louis. Wright is quite clear that the sites of these spontaneous outbursts are not the economic places of the factory or union hall, but the overdetermined urban *social* world of African Americans: "beer taverns, pool rooms, barber shops, rooming houses and dingy flats" (18).

Concluding his narrative, Wright exclaims to his Communist reader: “Say, Comrade, here’s the wild river that’s got to be harnessed and directed. Here’s that *something*, that pent-up folk consciousness. Here’s a fleeting glimpse of the heart of the Negro, the heart that beats and suffers and hopes—for freedom. Here’s that fluid something that’s like iron. Here’s the real dynamite that Joe Louis uncovered!” (19).

Ellison’s understanding of the folk as an unelaborated, essential kernel of the human will to act takes its place within this African-American Communist paradigm of black authenticity. If black Communist discourse understood black folk culture as the authentic identity of the black masses, then Ellison understood it in even more anti-essentialist terms, as the very positivity of human agency vital to revolutionary politics. He synthesizes this agency with the generative fluidity of the lumpenproletariat, producing the revolutionary agent of the lumpen-folk. As Wright did in the piece on Joe Louis, Ellison sought to probe the social for revolutionary resources, the “fluid something that’s like iron” of politics.

*Tuskegee (The Institutional)*

Ellison’s understanding of politics is not ultimately a spontaneist one: the opportunities of the lumpenproletariat, and the actional positivity of the folk, must be organized and directed by adequate institutional leadership. When Ellison arrived at Tuskegee, he entered an institution dedicated to the carrying-out of Booker T. Washington’s accommodationist political paradigm. He would soon discard that paradigm by leaving Tuskegee for New York in 1936, where he would affiliate with another institution of political coordination, the Communist Party. This is the lesson of the final stage of the 1933 trip: the need to evaluate the relative capacity of political institutions to seize upon and organize the political chances of the social. When Wright turns to his Communist reader and, pointing at the Joe Louis-inspired crowds, exclaims “*here’s* the wild river that’s got to be harnessed and directed,” he indicates the need of an institution, movement, or party to be adequate to the emergent possibilities of overdetermination. This criterion drives Ellison’s own evaluation of the Communist Party.

The linking of theory to the spontaneous will of the masses is, for Gramsci, one of the distinguishing features of Marxism. Other philosophies and institutions (the Catholic Church, for example) reserve philosophy for the privileged intellectual-priestly caste in order to preserve the current social order; Marxism must “construct an intellectual-moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass” and generate revolutionary change (*Selections* 332-3). For Gramsci, the historical bloc of masses with Marxist theorists and leaders is a complex, dynamic relationship of the inchoate feelings and thoughts of the masses with the knowledge of the intellectuals. The Marxist intellectual must theorize the “elementary passions of the people” by relating them to the terms of the given social structure and “connecting them dialectically to the laws of history and to a superior conception of the world.” Marxist leaders must explain certain concepts or inclinations that the people only dimly feel. However, the masses in turn contribute “passion” to the intellectuals, enabling them to transcend sterile or dry speculation and engage in political transformations: “[o]ne cannot make politics-history without this passion.” The ideal revolutionary institution is, for Gramsci (and for Ellison), “an organic cohesion in which feeling-passion becomes understanding and thence knowledge (not mechanically but in a way that is alive)” (*Selections* 418). Ellison’s career-long literary examination of institutional practice operates from this criteria: can a given institution adequately provide the theoretical cohesion and strategic leadership capable of “harnessing” and “directing” (to use Wright’s terms) the fluid possibilities of the social and the positive, resistant energy—the Gramscian “passion”—of the lumpen-folk?

When Ralph Ellison attended the Communist-backed National Negro Congress in Washington, D.C. in 1940, he was moved by the political will and acumen he found in the black sharecroppers and workers in attendance. As he reports in *New Masses*, the delegates came informed, ready to see how the Communist left could advance their political interests. Ellison notes the revolutionary form in which folk positivity is articulated among the delegates: “They were people sure of their strength. . . . In many of the speeches I had heard the names Gabriel, Denmark Vesey, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass. And in these mouths the names had a new meaning. And I suddenly realized that the age of the Negro hero had returned to American life.” In the speech of one

delegate, a CIO organizer from Chicago, Ellison hears “all the violence that America has made our Negro heritage . . . transformed into a will to change a civilization” (*Collected Essays* 16-17).

Yet at the same time, Ellison was skeptical of the Party’s institutional ability to recognize this source of revolution. As he wrote to Wright at the time his article on the Congress was published, the Congress was “the first real basis for faith in our revolutionary potentialities I have found,” a faith that corrects the “stupidities of black CP leaders.”

Some morning they [black Communist leaders] will be awakened from their “Marxist” fog by the people who think they are carrying out God’s wishes when they fight for freedom, telling them [the Communist leaders] “Comrades, us dont want to disturb youall, but us thought youall would like to know that us got the revolution going like youall been talking about. (11 May 1940)

Reminding Wright of his own conclusion to his 1935 Joe Louis article (that Ellison has the article on hand to quote from, five years later, suggests its importance in shaping Ellison’s thinking), Ellison writes of his own essay: “I guess what I am trying to say in the article . . . is that the ‘river’ is harnessing itself!” (11 May 1940). Communist leaders, he suggests, are blind to revolutionary opportunity when it emerges in non-class forms: just because the black folk grasps revolutionary consciousness in sociocultural terms of “God’s wishes” doesn’t discount their political effectiveness. It is not a loss of confidence in Marxist politics, but in the Party and its rigid “Marxism” that moves Ellison back toward the self-emergent political events of the social fabric of America. In an earlier letter, Ellison had even told Wright he’d be open, as a Party writer, to submitting his manuscripts to the Party for pre-publication inspection “if the inspectors are people the writers can respect” (22 Apr. 1940). Ellison is not defending censorship but recognizing that the efficacy of committed literature could benefit from an active exchange—a historical bloc—between writer and Party. He clearly distinguishes the mandates of Marxist political and literary production from the relative capacities of specific institutions to make good on those mandates.

Ellison’s first venture as a fiction writer was an attempt to synthesize, in fiction, the sociopolitical significance of his 1933 journey. “Hymie’s Bull” was written in 1937 and was slated to be published in *New Challenge* before the journal folded. The

protagonist is a black hobo riding freights in the Depression. It opens not at a point of origin, but within a continual social fluidity that is determined by the economic: “We were just drifting; going no place in particular, having long ago given up hopes of finding jobs.” No names and very little specifics are given, which highlights the narrator’s main purpose, the recounting of the spontaneous emergence of a lumpen-folk hero out of that social fluidity: “I’m fixing to tell you about [what] was done by an ofay bum named Hymie from Brooklyn.” Hymie is legendary because he killed a railroad bull in a knife fight. This is mainly an act of self-defense, an accidental skirmish rather than a political gesture. But it enables—much like Joe Louis’s victory over Max Baer—proto-political action. The day after Hymie kills the bull, the train the hoboes are riding is stopped in Montgomery, Alabama, and the black transients taken off. “We knew Hymie’s bull had been found and some black boy had to go.” But just then, “the storm broke and the freight started to pull out of the yards.” The hoboes make a run for the train, hop it, and evade the bulls (*Flying Home* 82, 83, 88).

Hymie is an interracial lumpen-folk hero (and by making him Jewish and from Brooklyn, Ellison links him ethnically and geographically to American Communism) whose act sets into motion a cathartic response to Jim Crow. When they are pulled off the train in Montgomery (though Ellison must have had Decatur in mind), the narrator and his fellow hoboes don’t question the workings of Jim Crow. Rather, they expect racial violence as the outcome of an apparently inevitable oppressive code. But then, in a fortuitous moment signaled by a messianic, “heavenly” event (the storm breaks), the given conditions of the social totality, figured by the technological object of the train, are cathartically transformed into an instrument of freedom. As in “A Party Down at the Square,” the objective materiality of capitalism provides resources for anti-racist (and thus anti-capitalist) sociopolitical resistance. The storm symbolically renders the emancipatory potential of Communism’s efforts to synthesize folk positivity with an appropriation of the resources of modern capitalism. Both the train and Hymie—the objective conditions of the totality and the political leadership of Communism—make resistance to Jim Crow, the racially-articulated form of class rule, possible. The story implies a criterion for the Communist Party as an institution: to be properly Marxist, it

needs to be capable of doing, in a programmatic and effective way, what Hymie has done here.

Arnold Rampersad points out that nowhere in his recollections of the 1933 journey does Ellison ever mention anyone like Hymie (99). But it's likely that Ellison is utilizing a folk legend he recalled hearing on that journey. "I remember that when I was riding freight trains through Alabama to get to Tuskegee Institute there was a well-known figure of Birmingham, called Ice Cream Charlie, whose story was also told over and over again whenever we evoked the unwritten history of the group," Ellison told Robert Penn Warren decades later. Charlie was an ice cream maker. His success in this trade led his white competitors to send the police after him, "and it ended with his killing twelve policemen before they burned him out and killed him." Ellison claims that there are many stories like Ice Cream Charlie's circulating amongst African Americans, and that "they form part of our image of Negro experience" (Warren 332). Ellison takes Ice Cream Charlie, a figure for the essential actional capacity of the folk, and transforms him into Hymie, combining that actional capacity with the efficacy of interracial collective action Ellison realized in Decatur. He thereby puts into practice Marian Minus's 1937 injunction to black writers to comb the "legends, myths and ballads . . . in which Negroes have immortalized their culture heroes for those elements of universality," those folkloric figures "touched with the super-human, who reflect the aspirations and failures of all humanity" (11).

The basic terms of this Marxist approach to the social, political, and institutional persist in Ellison's thought past the 1930s, and manifest themselves (albeit in differently-articulated form) in some of his most canonical essays. In "The World and the Jug" (1963-1964), for instance, he critiques Irving Howe for only understanding African-American life in terms of absolute oppression and deprivation. For Howe, the proper subject of African-American literature is unambiguous instrumental protest, which he finds in Wright's works, but not in Ellison's, to the detriment of his opinion of Ellison. While never denying the effective reality of racism, Ellison takes Howe to task for not recognizing the internal fluidity within societies organized by oppression. Ellison acknowledges, for example, "the viciousness which exists" in Mississippi, but he also insists on the need to "recognize the degree of freedom which also exists there precisely

because the repression is relatively crude.” By limiting authentic black expression to portraits of social oppression, Ellison implies, Howe reifies those processes of oppression. What sociology or sociologically-informed critics like Howe miss, in Ellison’s view, is the productive and even resistant possibilities that emerge within a social formation, possibilities Ellison here locates in the realm of culture: “Howe is so committed to a sociological vision of society that he apparently cannot see . . . that whatever the efficiency of segregation as a sociopolitical arrangement, it has been far from absolute on the level of *culture*” (*Collected Essays* 181, 163).

Similarly, we can see traces of his Marxist approach to politics and institutions in his well-known 1970s essay “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” in which Ellison revisits his time at Tuskegee to reflect on the relationship of artistic practice to the diversity of American society. Ellison deploys a lumpen-folk figure to signal the complexity of the social fabric of America as the necessary starting point of any act of artistic production, as the standard which the artist, just like the institution, must be able to meet. While studying music at Tuskegee, his teacher Hazel Harrison told him: “in this country you must always prepare yourself to play your very best wherever you are, and on all occasions,” because, in any audience, “even if it’s only in the waiting room at Chehaw station . . . there’ll always be a little man hidden behind the stove.” The remainder of the essay is an extended account of how Ellison came to understand this riddle. Chehaw Station is “a lonely whistle-stop” station near Tuskegee, the last place a classical musician would expect to find an informed, critically-receptive auditor for his music. The little man is a figure for the fluid, unpredictable access to cultural capital and aesthetic taste offered by American society. This “random accessibility” exceeds what “class and economic restrictions would appear to allow” (*Collected Essays* 493-4, 497). The problem is posed by Ellison in terms of American exceptionalism and liberal pluralism but he is still, forty years later, working from an understanding of the social as irreducibly overdetermined and relatively autonomous from “class and economic restrictions.” The little man, whose location makes him a hobo and whose mythical nature makes him a folk hero, is still the figure for the unexpected possibilities of the social to which any attempt to produce an artwork, or to articulate a political paradigm and organize an effective movement, must be adequate.

Ellison's Marxism is an attempt to figure out, using figures of the lumpen-folk, the moments of catharsis and the chances of revolutionary practice obtaining in the complex, uneven position of African Americans within the historical bloc of modern American society in the 1930s. In the late 1930s, he tried to put this problematic to work in novel form in *Slick*.

### **Another Unfinished Ellison Novel**

Alan Wald describes 1930s African-American leftist literature as “more compelling in its use of Marxism to divulge the social and cultural bases and multiple levels of racial oppression rather than in articulating programmatic paths leading to liberation.” However, Wald identifies a short story by Ellison—the late 1930s “The Black Ball”—as “the most poignant statement of that particular yearning for Black and white unity against racial and class oppression” (296-7). The story of a black hotel worker who is radicalized by a white union organizer, “The Black Ball” is, as Wald suggests, an effective story of the political possibility of cross-racial, working-class solidarity. This theme receives a much fuller analysis in *Slick*, written at roughly the same period. So while Wald's claim about the paucity of political theorization in African-American Communist literature is an accurate account of the *visible* literary production of the 1930s, it needs to be supplemented by the decade's major incomplete work of literary Marxism, African-American or otherwise. For if Ellison had published *Slick* in the 1930s, it would likely stand in a class of its own for its bold attempt to generate a Marxist political theory for the racial and social contexts of Depression America.

Ellison scholarship, with its tendency to focus on *Invisible Man* as the climax of Ellison's career, hasn't much cared for *Slick*. Arnold Rampersad accords it a limited measure of aesthetic success (in terms of creating character point of view, “plausible if rude dialogue,” and “restraint” in using the “technical tricks” of modernism) but finds it “stillborn,” handicapped by political didacticism (107). The “real” Ellison of *Invisible Man*, we are led to believe, had to work through social realism and political commitment in order to arrive at his distinctly psychological and surrealistic literary approach. Hence, Robert O'Meally locates 1939's “Slick Gonna Learn” (a published excerpt from *Slick*) in Ellison's “apprenticeship” period of 1939-1944, when he is not yet an artist and, as a

result, is given to simplistic political solutions (*Craft* 56-60). For mainstream Ellison scholarship, *Slick* is valuable because Ellison *didn't finish it*, an act of abandonment read in heroic terms as a rejection of politics for artistry.<sup>13</sup>

But if we disassociate ourselves from triumphalist framings of Ellison's career, we can re-read the fragmentary nature of *Slick* as valuable in its own right. Kenneth Warren offers an account of Ellison's work that suggests one way we can see *Slick* differently. Warren rejects much of the conventional wisdom of Ellison criticism and reads him as an *occasional* writer. *Invisible Man* and the canonical essays are not speaking to universal or timeless issues, he proposes, but to distinct, contingent problems in the cultural representation of blacks in America. The real project of Ellison's writing, for Warren, was not to mold himself into a timeless artist but to monitor the changing dynamics of black sociopolitical life. Warren asks us to reconceive of Ellison's body of writings as disjointed and disunified, their relative autonomy coming not from any organizing arc of Ellison's career, but from what is, in effect, the *conjunctural* orientation of Ellison as a social and cultural practitioner. While Warren doesn't consider *Slick*, his mode of reading Ellison allows us to ask what *Slick* being unfinished tells us about Ellison's understanding of the American sociopolitical conjuncture of the late 1930s, rather than what it tells us about Ellison's development into an artist.

We can also understand *Slick's* incompleteness by reference to the fact that Marx too left many unfinished works behind him. Étienne Balibar provides an interpretation of this tendency of Marx's. "More than other writers," Balibar tells us, "Marx *wrote in the conjuncture*. Such an option did not exclude either the 'patience of the concept' of which Hegel spoke, or the rigorous weighing of logical consequences. But it was certainly incompatible with stable conclusions: Marx is the philosopher of eternal new beginnings, leaving behind him *many* uncompleted drafts and projects" (6). One of the original Althusserians, Balibar accordingly emphasizes the contingency of Marxist thought, the political effectiveness of which is tied to its ability to re-theorize and re-develop methods of understanding social structure and political opportunity. Uncompleted writings are the material trace of the distinctly materialist character of Marxism, for the Marxist thinker has neither the time nor the space to retreat from sociopolitical engagement and systematize his or her thoughts into an architectonic, coherent system. "There is no

doctrine” in Marx, Balibar writes, “there are only fragments” (117). That *Slick* comes to us in fragmentary form reminds us that it is a product of committed literary labor: Ellison was not attempting to craft a transcendent work of art, but a theorization of the American social structure, the complexities of race and Jim Crow, the uneven development of American capitalism, and other overdetermined factors.

In valuing *Slick*’s incompleteness, I follow the lead of the editors of Ellison’s more famous uncompleted work. In the introduction to their recent selection from the unfinished follow-up to *Invisible Man*, *Three Days Before the Shooting...*, editors John F. Callahan and Adam Bradley propose that “it is precisely the incompleteness of the manuscripts that makes them such a compelling and fascinating contribution to American literature. In Ellison’s numerous drafts we see a literary master at work as he confronts the challenges presented by his novelistic form as well as those presented by the nation whose abiding and shifting identity he was so intent upon rendering in fiction” (xxvii). In *Slick*, we similarly see a writer at work confronting the challenges of writing a novel adequate to the complexities of American society and the concrete possibilities of revolutionary praxis. Incompletion is the evidence of work, of literary practice, of the rigors and challenges of committed writing.

In what follows, I identify some of the salient Marxist theoretical labors Ellison was attempting to perform in *Slick*. I cannot discuss every aspect of this ambitious novel. My reading is therefore not the definitive reading of *Slick*, but a reading that identifies and explores one salient aspect of its textual character. For *Slick* can be read as an attempt to translate theoretical postulates about social structure and political process into literary form, and to do so by motivating the symbolic or figurative elements of the literary rather than its documentary or mimetic-realist properties. *Slick* is a sort of didactic novel, but one whose didacticism operates through an economy of symbolic elements.

I do not wish to claim that *Slick* is a lost literary masterpiece. As I argue in the dissertation’s final chapter, *Slick*’s incompleteness is at least partially due to Ellison’s realization that to fashion a politically and socially-adequate—what he would refer to as a “scientific”—work of literature, he would have to reconsider the specific capacities and place of the literary in such an endeavor. If *Slick* feels unsuccessful, it is not because it is “too political,” with the implication of programmatic simplicity such a verdict suggests.

Rather, it's because the theoretical positions Ellison attempts to translate into literature make the novel itself a kind of one-to-one demonstration—in symbolic language—of predetermined (albeit critically important and complex) theoretical postulates. Unlike its contemporary *Somebody in Boots*, *Slick* doesn't produce illuminating or tactile experiential moments for the reader. Slick is a protagonist whose cognitive limitation very much resembles Cass McKay's, but Ellison never attempts the kind of immanent figuring of that limitation's phenomenological contours that Algren does. We are told about Slick's inability to understand social process, and Ellison deftly analyzes the sociopolitical reasons for that inability, but Ellison doesn't follow Algren in transporting us into the unsettling, unformed understanding of his lumpenproletarian protagonist. Even the passages recounting Slick's dreams, or his interior monologue, have a clinical if theoretically precise and nuanced quality.

One may get the feeling, reading *Slick*, that Ellison should have opted instead to write a book of Marxist theory, a non-fiction analysis of American conditions. He was, however, determined to emulate Wright's success as a literary radical. Wright did more than anyone else to encourage Ellison to write fiction in the 1930s, but he long suspected that Ellison was first and foremost a thinker. After reading Ellison's 1945 essay about his own *Black Boy* ("Richard Wright's Blues"), Wright described it to Ellison as his "best writing" and added: "I'd say that if your novel [*Invisible Man*] does not pan out as you plan it, then switch without blinking to non-fiction and go to town" (qtd. in Rowley 566n14).<sup>14</sup> Wright here indicates the remarkable theoretical acumen, the priority of the epistemological agenda, in all of Ellison's work, both fiction and non-fiction. *Invisible Man* is a product of Ellison's attempt to answer Wright's implied challenge, to undertake a critical examination of precisely how fiction's unique formal capacities can adequately serve the ends of theory. *Slick* may predate that examination, but it nonetheless stands as one of the most theoretically-advanced fictional works of the 1930s. So rather than dismiss *Slick* as a wisely-abandoned trial run at novel writing, I read *Slick* for what is, and for what Ellison *does* accomplish in it. Parsing the sociopolitical theory encoded in *Slick* lets us see Ellison as one of the Depression's leading Marxist thinkers.

***Slick*: Marxist Theory for Depression America**

The Ralph Ellison Papers at the Library of Congress contain 13 folders of manuscripts related to *Slick*. These manuscripts consist of a sequential typescript of the narrative, and many drafts (most with little variation) of various key episodes, some incorporated into that sequential narrative, some not. Additionally, there is a folder of Ellison's working notes for the novel. While the narrative is unfinished, Ellison made various notes indicating how he intended the plot to be resolved. Below, I mainly draw on the sequential typescript (folders 10 and 11), but I also refer to other drafts of episodes when pertinent. Since the novel was never finished, it's impossible to make claims about Ellison's intentions about the final authority of certain drafts or certain arrangements. In the material form in which it survives, *Slick* is not an authoritative text with subordinate variants, but an ensemble of literary and theoretical efforts.

Slick Williams is a recently-laid off African-American industrial worker in an unspecified Northern city (probably based on Dayton, Ohio, where Ellison started the novel in the fall of 1937 or early 1938) in the midst of the Great Depression. The setting in the North is a critical decision on Ellison's part, designed to introduce his definition of Jim Crow. "The presence of Southerners in the North," Ellison wrote in his notes, "coupled with the fascist minded of that region make life for the Negro as miserable as in the south." Just as in the South, "Northern capitalists exploit" blacks "and attempt to keep them at the same level. Use police force to intimidate them" (Folder 13).<sup>15</sup> Ellison sees the totality of American society—not just the "officially" segregated South—as structured around racial oppression. Jim Crow is a capitalist, not a regional, phenomenon, and it is moreover the distinctly *American* social articulation of the capitalist mode of production. To battle Jim Crow racism is, in America, to wage anti-capitalist struggle.

Needing to support his pregnant wife Callie and his two children, and owing his white landlord, Slick is strained financially. In the meantime, though Slick is at first oblivious to these developments, the workers at his former factory have gone on strike and the city is embroiled in class struggle. When Callie becomes ill from a complication in her pregnancy, Slick must resort to gambling in a dice game, with a black pimp named Bostic, to win money to pay for a doctor. He loses the game and pleads with Bostic to lend him the money instead. Bostic replies by coarsely suggesting Slick pimp Callie to raise the funds. Slick attacks Bostic, cutting his face with a bottle in the ensuing melee.

When a white cop intervenes to break up the fight, Slick impulsively punches him in the face, an act that he knows will seal his fate in a Jim Crow social system. Slick is arrested, and while awaiting his fate in his jail cell, he has a long dream in which he recalls his days as a soldier in World War I. However, in his dream Slick and his fellow black troops are led by Joe Louis, and they fight not the Germans but a giant white figure wielding a noose and leading white troops. The inherent folk agency of African Americans is figured by reference to a historical example of black militancy and (drawing on Wright's essay about Louis's fight with Max Baer) to Joe Louis's folk status as an avatar of black action. Just like the South Side celebrants who were encouraged by Louis's victory over a Max Baer, Slick dreams he takes on Louis's power himself: "He was Joe himself! He had a machine gun" (Folder 10). Ellison transposes Wright's claims about Louis's fight into fictional form, and draws on the experience of blacks in World War I to underscore their potent agency, but at this point, Slick's dream of violent resistance remains only a dream. Furthermore, it is not politically informed: he dreams that all whites are his enemies, and all blacks his allies. He longs not for class struggle, but for race war. The novel will explore how that passionate yet unconscious folk energy and will can be translated into a Communist politics (Folder 10).

Slick is awakened from this dream by the officer who will bring him to court, where presumably Jim Crow will do its work. But Ellison describes how, somewhere below the jail/court building, a building dedicated to reproducing white supremacy, "[a] motor was humming . . . causing the building to shake at regular intervals." Using the technological object of the motor, Ellison indicates the infrastructural determination of Jim Crow: capitalism is the "motor" of social practices of repression. Yet he also hints at the irregularity of that determination: the social may "shake at regular intervals" due to fluctuations in the economic, but the possibility of *irregular* shaking—the unpredictability of *overdetermination*, the necessary lag between economic domination and its social implementation—is foreshadowed. And that irregularity occurs when Slick enters the courtroom. The judge, in order to avoid drawing extra media attention when the resources of the police and courts are committed to the class struggle at the factory, lets Slick go. As Algren often does with Cass McKay's cognitive inability, the reader understands the judge's motive, but Slick can't see why he's escaped: "He had knocked

the hell out of a white man and gotten away with it! The law had let him go. With this thought, something seemed to surge in his mind.” In an act that recalls the Joe Louis-like prowess he gained in his dream, he verbally challenges the cop who arrested him. In retaliation, later that night a group of cops kidnap Slick and drive him out to the country to lynch him. But again Slick is saved from Jim Crow by developments in the economic. En route, a radio call orders the cops to the factory to break up a gathering of strikers. They beat Slick but let him escape, shooting haphazardly after him as they drive off. Slick walks the highway back to the city, where he is picked up by a white truck driver. Slick has been trained by Jim Crow to hate and distrust all whites, but the driver’s sympathy for him is genuine. The encounter is the incipient form of a class-based, interracial alliance against capitalism and racism (Folder 10).

The events of this day have not yet been understood by Slick: “‘Whut,’ he thought, ‘kinda day is this?’” (Folder 10). He does see, though, that the day has been singular, full of unpredictable events and encounters rather than the predictable outcomes of oppression. Jim Crow society revealed itself to be internally irregular and overdetermined, and porous to opportunities: the economic class struggle has twice saved Slick, in spite of Jim Crow. In the courtroom, the attention of the social totality on the local practice of Jim Crow, an attention produced by developments in the economic, causes the judge to suspend that practice. The unpredictable complexity of the social structure thus enables spontaneous resistance (Slick challenging the cop). The second time Slick is rescued by class struggle, an instrument of technology—the car radio—creates that relation to the totality. Technology is symbolically deployed and cathartically reappropriated, in the Gramscian sense, by Ellison in this sequence. The “motor” beneath the jail/court first indicates that Jim Crow is ultimately determined by technologically-advanced modern capitalism (rather than being a pre-modern or regionally-specific social system). Redeployed as the motor of the police car, it figures the repression of the Jim Crow social order as an articulation of class rule. But because the car contains within it the means of political disruption (the radio, through which the class struggle opens a fissure in the operation of Jim Crow), the car can be cathartically refigured as an instrument of revolutionary organization (the white driver’s truck). As in “A Party Down at the Square,” by deploying a system of technological symbols, Ellison indicates how

the overdetermination of the social gives rise to political chances. Slick still remains ignorant of why he wasn't lynched, and why the working-class driver, despite being white, cares for his welfare. The sources of that ignorance and the means of his education constitute the remainder of the novel, a program indicated by the title under which an excerpt from this sequence appeared in *Direction* in 1939: "Slick Gonna Learn."

Slick returns home but still needs money for Callie's worsening condition. The next day, he goes downtown and sees a car full of white men returning from a hunting trip. He is reminded that he has hunted before when out of work, and had made money selling quail (which the law prohibits hunting) to rich whites under the table. This hunting for the black market is the novel's form of lumpenproletarian subsistence, the illegal measures to which those who fall out of economic production are forced to resort. Slick also instantly recalls that last year, he had hunted with Dr. Baldrige, a white doctor who had offered to help Slick if he ever needed it (Folder 10). The reader's credulity is strained by Slick's late realization of what seems an obvious solution to his crisis, but it's important to note that this realization comes late because it only comes when Slick *sees* other hunters for the first time. Like Cass McKay, he is unable to think beyond his immediate sensory experience: he can only realize hunting as a solution when he sees hunters, just as he was unable to link the radio call that saved him to the class struggle because, of course, he couldn't see the strikers at the plant. This cognitive inability to abstract beyond the terms of sensory experience aids the reproduction of Jim Crow, as Slick is unable to differentiate among whites and blacks, unable to think past the sight of color. He thinks all blacks are his allies and all whites his enemies, while the reader knows, from the examples of Bostic and the truck driver, that the accurate parsing of his political options needs to be extended beyond race. Keeping Slick hostile to all whites is an effective way of nullifying revolutionary challenges to Jim Crow. But unlike Algren, who saw Cass's ignorance as an absolutely uninformed, opaque block to political organization, Ellison locates an unconscious mode of agency in Slick's ignorance. Furthermore, like Gramsci, Ellison will insist on the need for Communist leadership to consider the uninformed experiences of the masses seriously: Slick may not understand, but what Slick *feels* will be a vital component in any revolutionary movement.

Dr. Baldrige helps Slick by arranging for Callie to be taken to a Catholic hospital without charge. This is an act of off-market exchange: Baldrige expects Slick to bring him a pheasant in payment. This hospital becomes the focal point of the novel's political analysis of American modernity. The novel suggests that it's the Catholic specificity of the hospital that makes it willing to accept Callie: "they's good to colored," Slick admits (Folder 10). When he later visits Callie in the hospital, he is struck by the multiple statues of the Virgin Mary in the halls. For one, the statue signals the temporal heterogeneity of the hospital to the reader: this is a modern institution, but one infused with residual cultural overtones, and the contradiction between the modern and the residual seems to partially account for why Catholic hospitals are "good to colored." The differential element in this singular hospital—Catholicism—distances it from the organizing power relations of modernity: Slick notes that one statue of the Virgin has "[s]o many flowers it dont even smell like a hospital." The statues also impress Slick with their liveliness: "it seemed alive," he thinks of one. Another one resembles Callie: "Mary had a sweet expression on her face too. Callie had had that funny sweet look when she had the first baby" (Folder 11). The possibility of this singular place is coded in terms of universal recognition: the statues are white, but they speak to a shared level of human experience that transcends racial, cultural, and temporal boundaries. That unelaborated human universalism is, in *Slick*, the base of political organization against systems that seek to divide and hierarchize human subjects. Recently, Susan Buck-Morss has suggested that recognitions of this sort can ground an emancipatory, rather than a normative, humanism. Universality, she argues, can emerge in spite of cultural or national difference, in the gaps between "present constellations of power." "Common humanity exists in spite of culture and its differences. A person's nonidentity with the collective allows for subterranean solidarities that have a chance of appealing to universal, moral sentiment, the source today of enthusiasm and hope" (75, 133). We might have reservations about the ideological nature of any humanism, but if grasped as an ideologically-articulated resistance to logics of repressive difference like Jim Crow and capitalism, humanism offers a powerful mechanism for imagining revolutionary collectivity.

With the hospital sequence, then, we see how the diverse, uneven, overdetermined porousness of the social creates opportunities: Slick's ability to hunt in spite of being

unemployed, Baldrige's willingness to help in spite of racial difference, and the willingness of a Catholic hospital to work outside the rules of Jim Crow, all combine to offer Callie a chance at survival. Potentiality lies latent in the nebulous, lumpen margins and interstices of the social. And Baldrige's willingness to deal with Slick outside the laws of segregation *and* capital—to make a cross-racial exchange with him that is in excess of legitimate market exchanges—starts to defamiliarize Jim Crow for Slick. Slick senses that Baldrige and the truck driver are a different kind of white men. "He grouped [sic] for a word to name this thing he felt about the two white men" (Folder 10). Ellison's typo is symptomatically suggestive: what Slick is starting to learn is that his interests lie in *collective* political affiliation not with all blacks, but with *some* whites and *some* blacks, those committed to defying Jim Crow. Slick's cognitive struggle is not simply a passage from sheer ignorance to knowledge but is itself epistemologically privileged by Ellison. What Slick is wrestling with, ironically, is what doctrinaire Communists struggle with, and what Ellison would accuse Howe of failing to grasp in "The World and the Jug": namely, the need for *differentiation* in sociopolitical analysis, the need to see power as internally variant and fissured. Slick is starting to think conjuncturally, as opposed to in terms of dyadic idealisms (black/white; bosses/workers).

Yet the Catholic hospital is not a utopian site: it offers possibilities but doesn't, on its own, make good on them. Initially, Slick is optimistic about the hospital because it is modern: "He hoped Callie would not be afraid to go to the hospital. Last year Tom Slade wouldnt go when the doctor told him to and two days later his appendix had burst and killed him. Folks oughta git outa that kind stuff. This heahs a 'enlightened age,' he thought, remembering a phrase from a newspaper." Even while he decries this apparently anti-modern attitude among blacks, he acknowledges its legitimacy immediately after. "Hope that ambulance don come [for Callie] too soon," he vaguely worries, because he recalls one night when he came upon an ambulance parked in the street. Its motor had broken down, and the attendants were trying to repair it. "[A]s he came along side he saw a woman lying inside with her throat cut. It had been strange. The street silent, the attendants working silently and the big black woman framed in the glass like a picture, bleeding on the white sheets." When the smooth operations of the social totality are momentarily disrupted—the ambulance motor breaks down—Slick gets

a glimpse of the darker reality about hospitals: that as modern institutions they are involved in the structural Jim Crow process of reproducing the social death of black subjects. Callie initially fears the hospital, citing the real possibility of being subjected to forced sterilization: “Aw lawd, they gonna cut me up. Ah know it. That’s whut they [do] to colored folks. They gon let them student doctahs practist on me!” (Folder 10).<sup>16</sup> And while the hospital at first treats Callie, Ellison’s notes indicate that, by the end of the novel, he intended to have Callie die because the Catholics are unwilling to perform an abortion to save her life (Folder 13). Further, Callie and Slick lament that they had been “so crazy” with passion they had forgotten to use birth control, hence finding themselves burdened with another child they cannot support: by not using modern methods and allowing life to be organically (traditionally) conceived, they underwrite their own socioeconomic death (Folder 11). These elements all suggest that the possibilities generated by the contradictions of Catholic and Jim Crow, residual and modern, organic and technological, must be actively manipulated by counter-hegemonic political practice. The hospital is a modern site that—like the various cars and motors of the novel—must be cathartically appropriated if it is to serve emancipatory purposes. The overdetermined modern social totality of America, synecdochically figured by the hospital, is the precondition of revolutionary politics, not its guarantee.

As Slick leaves the hospital, he sees a plane flying overhead and is impressed by its modernity and speed: “No wonder they dont wont us up there in those things,” he thinks. He then recalls the folk tale of an African American who died, went to heaven, and when he got wings, started “zooming around up there, breaking all the speed laws. Knocking over the angels. Everything.” St. Peter throws him out, but as he leaves, he says: “Yuh done put me out but St. Peter, one thing yuh got to admit is Ah was the flyingest sonofabitch what eva been up here.” Slick laughs to himself recalling the story, and then the action shifts without further elaboration (Folder 11).

The point of this interlude can be clarified by noting that Ellison reworked this folktale into a later published short story, his well-known “Flying Home” (1944). The story recounts an encounter between the black folk and modernity. Todd, an African-American Tuskegee Airman, crashes in the Alabama countryside. Injured, he meets Jefferson, a black folk figure who tells him a similar story to the one Slick recounts

above. Todd eventually overcomes his initial hostility toward Jefferson, borne out of his self-conviction that he has surpassed his “backwards” folk identity. For Todd, airplanes have always been symbols for the desire to transcend Jim Crow and what he sees as his delimited black social identity. What he learns is that just because he flies an airplane doesn’t mean that he has achieved that transcendence. Rather, it means that he fits well into a segregated military unit (*Flying Home* 147-173). As Robin Lucy explains, the story argues exactly what Jefferson’s tale indicates: that truly anti-racist politics must appropriate technology rather than use it as whites permit. Todd “has mistakenly equated” his search for identity “with the product and symbol of technological prowess, his plane.” He must instead find in Jefferson’s folk story “a self-immolating, transformative energy” (Lucy 276-77). Airplanes—like hospitals, synecdoches for modernity—do not of themselves produce transformation. They must be appropriated and stamped with the folk character—an unelaborated, essential transformative will—of African-Americans. *Slick* insists, therefore, on the necessity of politics to Marxism, debunking the orthodox Marxist position that the material conditions of capitalism will organically, of themselves, lead to capitalism’s negation.

Slick’s sociopolitical education continues as Callie recovers in the hospital. At the local pool hall, one of the striking workers, Liles Jackson, commends Slick for his assault on Bostic: “I’m just naturally polite to prizefighters and guys like that,” he jokes to Slick. Liles may only be jesting, but his comment transforms the novel’s earlier invocation of a prizefighter. In Slick’s dream, Joe Louis stood for the essential militancy of blacks as directed toward whites: he was the avatar of black strength in a race war. Now, Liles suggests that that folk strength was more appropriately directed toward Bostic, the black pimp. And of course he is right: by refusing Slick a loan, and suggesting that Slick pimp Callie, Bostic stood in for the wider networks of Jim Crow capitalist rule, which deny both financial sustainability and human status to Slick and Callie. The struggle through which Slick’s problems can be solved is not one of black against white, but of interracial revolutionaries against Jim Crow. Liles goes on to urge Slick to join the strikers, to overcome his distrust of whites and fight for his material, economic interest. He speaks to the need for blacks to translate their folk practices of agency and political will into class

struggle: “Nigguhs been knowing how to outsmart white folks in little things. Now its time to learn to outsmart em in the big things” (Folder 10).

The novel further theorizes the ontology of political action in one of the few episodes not worked into the sequential typescript. Shortly after Callie enters the hospital, Slick is visited by his white landlord, Snodgrass. Slick acts impulsively, threatening Snodgrass with a fire poker when he asks Slick for the rent: “I oughta take this poker and whip yo fucking head. You was trying to come in my house, thats what you was trying to do. You caint do that to me. Long as I’m renting this lousy shack dont you never let me even hear tell of you tryin that agin.” Snodgrass is taken aback and tries to tell Slick that he’s “a friend to the colored people.” Slick retorts: “You aint no friend of mine!” He acts against Snodgrass because Snodgrass is white, but this subjective motive leads him to an act that is *objectively* one of class confrontation: Slick defends his house as if he owned rather than rented it. By claiming it as *his* house, he expropriates what capitalism and Jim Crow have expropriated from him: the means of security and sustainability. And while Snodgrass may well be, compared to most white landlords, a “friend” to blacks, because of his class status he is not, as Slick declares, a friend of his. Like Cass McKay, Slick acts out of ignorance, but unlike Cass, his acts have a political significance he is not yet aware of – they are potentially generative rather than a block or obstacle to politics. Slick is terrified, afterwards, by his reception of Snodgrass. He rightly fears retaliation, but he also cannot understand *why* he did it: “Any other time he would have hidden his anger and made an excuse about the rent money. He would have acted safe, as his life had taught him Negroes had to act. . . . It would have been like going to the grocery and asking the man for a dimes worth of sausage and the man giving you the sausage and you laying the dime on the counter and walking out of the grocery and forgetting it. But since he had been taken for a ride by the policemen he could no longer trust himself.” What Richard Wright called the “ethics of Jim Crow”—the subtle behavioral codes blacks must observe to protect themselves in a Jim Crow society—keep Slick safe as long as he unthinkingly follows them. The analogy to buying sausage drives this point home: his personal safety, as well as the smooth reproduction of Jim Crow, depends on his acceptance of standardized codes of cross-racial social interaction.

But since he escaped his beating, he feels he has “washed his self-control away. . . . And now he had to think to protect himself.” That Slick acts out of ignorance—he doesn’t know why he challenged the cop, why he challenged Snodgrass, what the sociopolitical reasons for his assault of Bostic were—is now less important, given that his actions are the *precondition for thought and analysis*. To even be able to reflect on his actions, to analyze his place in the society he inhabits and to understand his political options, Slick must impulsively break out of a behavioral system designed to stifle cognition entirely, what Ellison here calls the “iron ring of action placed upon Negroes” (Folder 9). His uninformed actions in an overdetermined, unpredictable social field create the insights (sometimes Jim Crow retaliation *doesn’t* work perfectly) and the encounters (Baldrige, Liles, the truck driver) that can serve as the raw materials for political theory. Theory does not impose itself on events and actions, Ellison suggests, but arises in response to and because of them: it is, in other words, conjunctural.

One of the novel’s more startling endeavors, then, is to establish revolutionary politics at base, not as a matter of intellectual position or conviction but of objective necessity or natural instinct. One does not choose to be a revolutionary, one acts out of necessity in ways that form the basic actional energy of transformative politics. In his notes on the novel, Ellison spells out the syllogistic logic of this claim: “Capitalism makes men slaves,” he proposes. “Slavery is death,” so in capitalism, “man is dominated by death.” Hence, “[o]ne strives to escape from capitalism so as to escape from death” (Folder 13). Jim Crow and capitalism make human life impossible—if humanity is to survive, they must be negated. Communism is not a matter of principles, but of biology.

The first demonstration of this concept occurs in an episode Ellison drafted multiple times but didn’t incorporate into the sequential narrative of *Slick*. Titled “Mr. Mac” or “Tales of a Southern Road,” the episode appears to be set in Slick’s youth. In it, a white man (identified in some drafts as “Mr. Mac”) has crashed his car on a highway in an unfamiliar part of the South. Seriously injured and pinned beneath the wreck, he desperately hopes for help of any sort to arrive. Three young black men (one of whom is named Slick), fleeing a lynch mob massacring the blacks of the local town, come across the wreck. At first they feel little compulsion to risk their own lives by rescuing this white man, but one of them, T-Man (whose name, and subsequent attempt to sacrifice

himself for the life of another, suggest that Ellison perhaps intends him as a Christ figure), recognizes the man as a fellow human in need. This recognition is the sort Susan Buck-Morss describes, which defies Jim Crow by denying racial difference any reality in the demands of human ethics. Like the white trucker's human recognition of Slick, it occurs on the highway, Ellison's symbolic setting for the unexpected encounters and recognitions modernity makes possible. And it is an entirely instinctual act on T-Man's part, preceding theoretical elaboration: "Yes, the man was white," he thinks, "but pain changed all that. For some reason he could not fully understand he had to help this man. Maybe he might be in the same fix some day. He wanted to think it out, but there was no time." The three men use their strength to pry the car up on a boulder. They free the man's body, but realize that he needs a doctor if he is to survive. They can't get a doctor, however, since they can't return to town for fear of their lives. So they are forced to leave him to die and continue their flight. Ellison's first point is the same point he makes about airplanes and other technological objects: the folk strength of the black men (linked to the black church through T-Man's name, and to an earthy organicism through their use of the boulder) is insufficient to save a life without modern techniques of medicine. If T-Man is going to be able to save the white man—an act whose objective significance is a political blow against Jim Crow—then he needs *both* folk will *and* modern resources. Secondly, the story demonstrates that Jim Crow makes human life impossible: here, it prevents blacks from saving the life of a white man even when they desire to do so. At the end of one draft, as the man dies, he thinks: "The colored boys had gone and left him. Niggers in this county is scary's hell. . . . Yuh cain depend on niggers. Too scary." In a moment of dramatic irony, the man gives voice to Jim Crow's ideology of absolute racial difference, an ideology that, of course, has taken his life (Folder 2).

By making Callie's pregnancy the precipitating event of *Slick's* plot, Ellison indicates that capitalism cannot support human life, either. Capitalism cannot provide Slick with the means to sustain financially the biological reproduction of life, and ideology prohibits any corrective measures (abortion) Slick and Callie could take. As Slick exclaims in frustration when Callie breaks the news to him: "It oughta be a sin fo it to happen, specially with times like they is!" (Folder 10). Elsewhere he observes: "You supposed to be a man and you have a wife and kids and caint even see that they have

clothes to wear and something to eat. You caint even fight. He felt his muscles flex over his body and experienced the need for physical action which served to ease him when problems became complicated” (Folder 5). Bostic’s suggestion to him only reminds him of how capitalist society offers no humane, legitimate way of saving Callie’s life. His instinctual need to act, generated by the irresolvable contradiction between capitalist production and the biological reproduction of human life, leads him to attack Bostic and set the plot of the novel, and Slick’s political education, in motion. Capitalism, Ellison suggests, is simply incompatible with human existence—it is both logical and natural to negate it. Political commitment, then, requires theoretical explanation and institutional leadership, but those are second-order additions. At its root, revolution is a necessary proposition, an instinctual revolt of the human organism against a system that refuses to sustain it. That revolt, as we saw with the Snodgrass incident, is what makes theory and organization possible.

Ellison read and took notes on various works of psychology in an attempt to give Slick’s political impulses a scientific, psychological grounding. Most influential was William H. Sheldon’s 1936 study *Psychology and the Promethean Will*, from which Ellison carefully copied multiple passages (Folder 13). He was interested in what Sheldon called the Promethean and Epimethean tendencies of the human character. Briefly, Sheldon identified the “Promethean conflict” as a conflict between two character instincts: “The Promethean element of consciousness is the forward straining of a better world. When dominant, this element gives rise to radical idealism. The Epimethean or backward straining element is the wish for safety and for the security of righteousness. Epimetheanism is conservative idealism” (76). Sheldon primarily applies this distinction to the mind’s engagement with religion; Ellison adapts it as a model for the revolutionary stakes of human action. When Slick challenges Snodgrass, he renounces the Epimethean prioritizing of safety and security and makes a Promethean gesture for a “better world.” Sheldon’s vocabulary allows Ellison to ascribe a political and utopian dimension to untutored instinct. Ellison was also drawn to Sheldon’s attempt to advance a theory of psychology “in which individual and social psychology are seen as inevitable reflections of each other” (102). Like Sheldon, Ellison too was attempting to situate human psychology in relation to social totality. As Barbara Foley writes, Ellison gleaned from

Sheldon how “the universals of myth provide access to a dialectical psychology that maps the conflicts within individuals along the axes of contradiction in society at large” (*Wrestling* 131).

But this instinctual manner of revolt on Slick’s part still needs to be organized and educated: in keeping with my earlier tripartite delineation of Ellison’s problematic, the *institutional* component still needs to be applied. Hence, the final episode of *Slick* concerns Slick’s accidental encounter with Booker Smalls, a black Communist intellectual clearly modeled on Ellison himself.<sup>17</sup> It’s never quite clear what Booker is doing in the city, but he may be involved with the strike. Booker is a committed Communist incarnation of Ellison’s later “thinker-tinker” protagonist of *Invisible Man*, a character working to understand the relationship of revolutionary theory to on-the-ground political practice. As Slick walks the streets one night, he finds himself pursued by police for violating a curfew imposed due to the strike. In his flight, he takes shelter in the Abraham Lincoln Republican Club, a room above a drugstore. In this marginal social site, whose political valence is explicitly signaled, he encounters Booker. Booker is not exactly a politically-enlightened mentor figure like Dill Doak in *Somebody in Boots*. While he aims to bring theoretical clarification to Slick’s experiences in their long conversation, he also learns from Slick. Together, they form a Gramscian historical bloc of intellectual and popular, and they synthesize theoretical understanding with mass feeling. Their relationship models the ideal form of the Communist Party as an institutional cohesion of agential passion and theoretical insight. That relationship is ultimately determined by the economic—the strike yet again lies behind one of Slick’s accidental encounters—but it takes form in the interstitial, political places of the social.

Slick tells Booker of how he escaped being lynched by the police, and Booker points out that he was “lucky . . . that they were having a picket line out at the plant that night.” For the first time, Slick realizes that “his life had been saved by the radio call, by the pickets.” He performs an act of cognitive totalization, connecting, through the technological mechanism of the radio, the immediacy of his experience to its larger structural causation. So it seems at first that Booker will be a source of political wisdom, bringing theoretical light to Slick’s inchoate experiences. But then they start discussing hospitals. Slick, based on his experiences with the Catholic hospital, thinks a hospital is

“bout the best place to be in the whole damn town.” With no work available, and with the kinship structures of the Southern folk shattered by Northern industrialization, Slick sees the hospital as the only place blacks can receive care and aid. Booker objects and tells the story of how Bessie Smith died after suffering a car accident and being refused treatment by a whites-only hospital in Memphis. Hospitals might be “humane” institutions for whites, Booker argues, but not for blacks: “some of us Moses just refuse to understand that they aren’t for us!” Booker condemns hospitals as undifferentiated apparatuses of Jim Crow rule, and he denounces blacks’ reliance on them as unconscious accession to their own social death: “we’ll have to keep dying like Bessie until we learn that they dont want us in the hospitals.” Slick sees his point, but then tells him about Callie being cared for in the Catholic hospital. Booker is taken aback and apologizes. “Thass allright,” Slick responds, “Yuh didnt know nothin bout it.” This is not a mere social faux pas. Slick has complicated Booker’s understanding of social structure, bringing to light its overdetermined, fluid, unpredictable heterogeneity while still acknowledging that it is ultimately a structure in dominance. Slick’s experience brings a valuable lesson to Booker’s understanding, and it’s the same lesson Hazel Harrison taught Ellison, Ellison taught Howe, and Althusser and Gramsci taught orthodox Marxism: change and opportunity happen *because* of the disjuncture between socioeconomic power and its on-the-ground implementation. As this conversation concludes, “[t]he drone of an airplane passing . . . in the night sounded dimly in the room,” suggesting the revolutionary stakes of this meeting of theory and experience.

Booker then engages Slick in something like a Marxist talking cure, asking him to describe his feelings when the cops kidnapped him. This is a means of political education, since as Slick admits, “I just try not to talk about it. . . . I try not to even think about it.” But at Booker’s insistence, Slick recounts, step-by-step, his fears and worries of that night and articulates for himself his newly-realized political will. In the police car, Slick had so totally resigned himself to dying that when he was let go, even though the cops shot after him, he was no longer scared of whites. “[I]t was like it had been all my life. They was dishing it out and I was taking it. Only it aint the same now and I aint going to lie about it. It aint the same cause now I know that when I git tired of taking it I can dish it out to them and I aint scaired of whats gonna happen to me if they catch me. I

been hearing it all my days but now I know its the truth, A man aint got nothing to do but die!” Jim Crow relies on Slick fearing death and acting within its rules to keep safe: “You know man, when you think it out,” he tells Booker, “they are able to do all they do us just cause we scaird to die.” Once he overcomes that fear of death, he can act against his repression. He is thus, with Booker’s aid (aid that inculcates knowledge without imposing it), able to understand why he threatened Snodgrass, why he can “no longer trust himself” after the incident with the cops.

Their conversation then turns to hunting, as Slick tells Booker his plans to make a living hunting illegal game and selling it to whites. Booker recalls hunting from his youth and notes: “We were poorer that winter than any I can remember and that was the winter I had the most fun.” Slick understands: “That was because of the hunting. . . . You caint beat hunting for sport. If I was well off that’s all I’d ever do.” Ellison articulates a very different understanding of lumpenproletarian subsistence than Algren’s in the 1930s: socially-illegitimate lumpen survival methods contain pleasure and possibility in their own right if fully liberated from material need. The freedom of the lumpen from the economic, from the mandate to labor, prefigures the freedom of all in post-capitalist society, when labor will no longer be a matter of necessity. Booker agrees to Slick’s proposal that they hunt together to make a living. “This will be like history repeating itself for me,” he exclaims, recalling his childhood. But the words put him in mind of the famous opening to *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. Marx, he tells Slick, “meant that the first time an incident occurred in history it was tragic, like death. But the next time it happened it was foolish and something to laugh at, like Mussolini who tries to play Julius Caesar.” Booker gives an accurate interpretation of a difficult passage in Marx, but Slick (speaking for Ellison’s reader) asks him what that has to do with him and hunting. Booker responds “I dont know yet.” Clearly, Booker is “gonna learn” something as well.

He starts this process of inquiry by telling Slick about Marx. Slick’s false consciousness quickly comes to the surface: he is suspicious of Marx because “them Reds” like him, and because “[h]e was a Jew wasnt he?” Booker brings Marxism to Slick not by dictating it over his ideological hesitations, but by translating Marx into Slick’s cultural language, into what Gramsci would call his “common sense”: the inchoate, vernacular knowledge of the masses (*Selections* 323-6). He thus stresses the similarities

between Marx and Frederick Douglass, a figure more familiar to Slick: both were brilliant yet “quick tempered” and eager to fight oppression on the international level. Booker speculates that Douglass may have read Marx, “might have met Marx in Europe when he met many of the other well known revolutionists,” such as the Irishman Daniel O’Connell. Douglass, Booker tells Slick, “was a guy like you: mad and wanting to fight.” It was Douglass, Booker argues, who convinced Lincoln to arm blacks in the Civil War, and Booker compares the fight of blacks against the Confederates to the revolutionary struggles of the proletariat. Slick is impressed: “It makes you feel proud. You can respect a guy like old Frederick Douglass. You say he believed in Marx?” Booker amplifies the argument by suggesting that Douglass and Marx looked alike: “They both looked like lions. If you go down to the library and ask for pictures of them you’ll see that they both have big heads, thick manes of hair, with large beards and bushy eyebrows. And in the pictures I’ve seen of Marx he was almost as dark as a Negro.” Slick is persuaded. Booker’s account of Douglass and Marx “made him feel that he was remembering some long forgotten, necessary thing.” By articulating Marxism in a mode that allows Marx to be conflated with Douglass, Booker instills a newly felt sense of self-worth and political power in Slick. Marx and Douglass meet in a shared space of figurative folk blackness, a black folk identity defined in terms of an essential human rage and militant strength directed against all forms of life-denying oppression.

Booker explains that his knowledge of Marx and Douglass comes not from institutional education, but from seeking out others who felt as strongly as he did the need to combat racist dehumanization. Those others are not the traditional black leaders identified with the Tuskegee paradigm. Booker critiques middle-class black leaders for not changing their methods to meet the current needs of the conjuncture: they propose programs “which would never work today even if they worked years ago because the world had changed.” They are, like *Invisible Man*’s Brotherhood, dogmatic rather than political. Unlike Marx and Douglass, “they dont have guts and they dont have hate and they have no yearning deep down in them for change, or for real freedom.” Those with guts and the desire for change are the black lumpenproletariat—“those who sing the blues, shoot crap, drink corn, and fight with razors and tell white folks to keep their distance”—and the Communists. In other words, because those black lumpen figures are

so marginalized, and like Slick no longer even fear their own death, they are a powerful resource for a Communist-led political movement. As we saw in chapter one, the notion of “guts” was often invoked in Depression Communist discourse to figure the emergence of “tough” political will out of deprivation. Here Booker suggests that Communism is only effective, as a political program, when it inventively harnesses that gutsiness.

Booker then finally realizes what his spontaneous citation of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* had to do with hunting. When he hunted for survival as a child, it was “tragic” because he didn’t understand the sociopolitical causation of that necessity. But now it’s a farce, since he sees why he has been forced again to this means of survival. He understands it not as fate, not as simply self-evident reality, but as the consequence of a human-made socioeconomic system. “[W]hen you see it as something that people could stop if only they would and they don’t then it’s a farce,” he tells Slick. Slick objects that “a man can’t do nothing about being out of work.” To which Booker responds: “You could if you had enough people who wanted to stop it badly enough” (Folder 11).

Booker has articulated the Gramscian theory of catharsis: the “starting-point” of Marxist politics is the recognition that the objective conditions of the conjuncture are not immutable, but open to instrumental appropriation: they then cease to be determining factors and become the raw materials of revolutionary practice. Ellison likely came to this grasp of catharsis through his reading of André Malraux’s *Man’s Fate*. In 1936, Ellison was first introduced to the left when he met Langston Hughes, accidentally (as Slick meets Booker), in the lobby of the Harlem YMCA, and Hughes lent him a copy of Malraux’s novel (Rampersad 83-4). It would become a favorite novel, and Malraux’s work would influence his thought and writing. Booker’s retheorization of the opening lines of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* is Ellison’s attempt to render the simple yet crucial lesson about Marxism voiced by a character in Malraux’s book. Dismayed by the political complacency of the Chinese Communist Party, Communist activist Kyo Gisors protests to the leadership: “But in Marxism there is the sense of a fatality, and also the exultation of a will. Every time fatality comes before will I’m suspicious” (143). When orthodox Marxists emphasize the objective development of history and denounce political will as ideological voluntarism, they become fatalistic, seeing history as a force—like a god from Greek tragedy—operating beyond their intervention. This fatality

easily becomes an alibi for political inaction and self-serving resignation, for the refusal to appropriate objective conditions and to seize political opportunities when they arise. Invisible man will make a similar protest to the Brotherhood following Todd Clifton's funeral. When Brotherhood leaders rebuke invisible man for trying to translate Clifton's funeral into a political opportunity rather than passively following abstract laws of historical development, he responds that "a lot of people are angry because we failed to lead them in action," failed to organize the people's spontaneous anger over Clifton's murder *as* a political movement (472). Without catharsis and politics, Marxism becomes a mode of ideological complacency no different than Slick's assertion that "a man cain do nothing bout being out of work." Booker uses *The Eighteenth Brumaire* to articulate the theoretical position informing this protest: the political efficiency of any self-proclaimed Marxist institution is its ability to transform fatality into will and objective conditions into subjective political resources. Marxists must fashion a cathartic depiction of capitalist society, rendering it not as a tragic portrait of unassailable oppressive conditions, but as a farce in which the big joke is that capitalism, for all its structural determinative power, can in fact be vanquished by effectively-organized human action.

The narrative ends at this point, except for a few brief fragments dealing with Slick leaving the drug store and Booker's ruminations. But it seems like a logical climax, given how the novel reads less like a fictional narrative than like a work of theory. The dialogue between Booker and Slick synthesizes the novel's explicit and implied theoretical strands. Judging from his notes, Ellison planned to have Callie's situation get worse. The Catholics refuse to perform an abortion to save her life, so Slick must raise money to get her into another hospital. To do so, he goes hunting and in some kind of altercation, shoots a white farmer. When he returns, he discovers Callie has either died anyway or gone insane. Slick either kills himself or is killed somehow as a result of his run-in with the farmer. Booker, presumably feeling a new sense of political commitment and faith in the Communist cause, leaves the city to go south and fight segregation (Folder 13). While this ending might tie up the narrative, it's hard to see how it could have offered material for further theoretical elaboration beyond what Ellison had already produced.

As a work of literature, *Slick* leaves much to be desired. The plot is episodic with missing or unconvincing transitions, and characters serve more as demonstrations for ideas (hence Ellison's frequent reliance on dialogue) than as wholly convincing personalities. But the novel offers many theoretical insights and bold assertions, touching on the inevitability of revolutionary action, the modes by which such action is theoretically supported, strategies for political education and mass organization, the relation of Jim Crow to American capitalism, and the location of political opportunities in the conjunctural complexity of American society. In a decade dominated by labor novels, *Slick* is a sociopolitical novel: the class struggle is always determining the accidents and encounters of Slick's navigation of the social, but its presence in the text is always deferred, as the strikers and the factory are never represented. Rather than documentary accounts of labor and the heroic formation of the proletariat as a world-historical agent, we have a complex and varied portrait of the social field of politics. If the novel doesn't cohere as a literary work, one need only imagine Ellison's predicament to understand why. He was equipped, on the one hand, with an understanding of social structure and political process that anticipates later Marxist theoretical developments and is much more complex than that found in mainstream Communist discourse. On the other hand, he was determined to be a fiction writer. Hence, for Ellison, fully implementing his theoretical problematic in literature while respecting the relative autonomy of the literary was certainly a daunting task. He seems to have tried to write *Slick* backwards, to produce a novel that would reflect, in its full complexity, his distinct Marxist problematic. It was apparently a taxing effort, as he didn't finish a novel for more than a decade.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Wright drew on the concept of the lumpenproletariat to characterize Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, as he explains in his 1940 essay "How 'Bigger' Was Born." Ellison famously disaffiliated from Wright in the 1963-1964 essay "The World and the Jug," but the two appear to have ceased regular correspondence in the early 1950s. Prior to that point, the two writers were close friends, invested in similar political and literary projects and travelling in the same Communist circles. Prior to "The World and the Jug," Ellison often positioned *Native Son* (1940) as the benchmark for African-American fiction, even calling it "the first philosophical novel by an American Negro" ("Recent Negro Fiction" 22). "Richard Wright's Blues," Ellison's review of Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), still stands as the most sophisticated, elegant defense of the aesthetic and political dimensions of Wright's work. Ellison's relationship to Wright is considered further in the following chapter.

<sup>2</sup> A note on terminology is necessary here. By "Communism" and "Communist," I refer to the historical Communist Party of the United States (a section of the international Communist movement), its

institutions, apparatuses, and positions. By “radical,” I mean a generally anti-racist and anti-capitalist position and sensibility that may or may not coincide with the “line” of the Communist movement. By “Marxism,” I refer to the problematic of social analysis and revolutionary praxis which I read as underwriting Ellison’s literary practice. In Ellison scholarship, these three terms are often used interchangeably and unhelpfully.

<sup>3</sup> With *Invisible Man*, Ellison critics have often implied, he fully enters into his true self as writer, which is defined by one or more of the following authorial locations: within political discourses of anti-Stalinist liberalism and American democratic pluralism, high-modern or Western literary traditions, or expressive traditions particular to African-American literature and culture. For examples of accounts of Ellison’s work in terms of liberal-democratic politics, see Lucas Morel’s recent edited collection *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope*. For some readings of Ellison alongside high-modernist literature or Western cultural categories, see Forrest, Burke, and O’Meally’s “The Rules of Magic.” For noteworthy positionings of Ellison within particular African-American cultural and literary formal traditions, see Kent, Stepto, Baker, Smith, and Callahan’s *In the African-American Grain*.

<sup>4</sup> See also her essays “The Rhetoric of Anticommunism in *Invisible Man*,” “Ralph Ellison as Proletarian Journalist,” and “Reading Redness: Politics and Audience in Ralph Ellison’s Early Short Fiction.” In *Heroism and the Black Intellectual*, Jerry Gafio Watts also criticizes, from a left-wing perspective, the political implications of what he sees as the post-Communist Ellison’s abandonment of materialist sociopolitical engagement.

<sup>5</sup> Arnold Rampersad describes “chaos” as “the most burdened word in his [Ellison’s] cultural vocabulary” (313). Generally, Ellison uses it to refer to the protean fluidity of American and human experience. It’s possible to read Ellison’s “chaos” as a denial of the material reality of class structure—or any effective oppression—in American society, but I see it as much more in line with Althusser and Gramsci’s ontologies of social complexity. John Callahan points out that Ellison’s “chaos” is always tied to the potential for human agency. Callahan describes it as “the front man for possibility. It is, Ellison believes, man’s fate to defy the formlessness of chaos and the abyss, and at the same time to recognize that possibility flows from chaos” (“Chaos” 128). Callahan’s vocabulary may be following the humanist tone of Ellison’s, but he situates the functionality of American social “chaos” in terms very close to Althusserian and Gramscian Marxist theory.

<sup>6</sup> Despite its tendency to not fully recognize Gramscian themes (historical specificity, social institutions as sites of political struggle, etc.) present in Althusser’s work, Stuart Hall’s essay is still invaluable for identifying the many confluences in Althusser and Gramsci’s thought. My pairing of these thinkers as constituting an effort to think the sociopolitical in Marxism follows many of Hall’s insights.

<sup>7</sup> Here I largely agree with John S. Wright, who has paid the most attention to the importance of technology and technological innovation in Ellison’s work. Wright demonstrates that Ellison does not share high modernism’s suspicions of technological mechanization and scientific progress. Rather, “revolutionary technological modernity” is for Ellison a crucial component of African-American identity in the modern era (147). While largely focused on how Ellison motivates the racially-charged significances of electrification in response to its symbolic presence in texts by white modernists like Hemingway and Fitzgerald, Wright nonetheless indicates that technology, for Ellison, exists in a synecdochic relationship with social relations. Ellison approaches technology, in Wright’s words, “as an extension of human lives, as something *someone* makes, *someone* owns, something *some* people oppose, most people *must* use, and *everyone* tries to make sense of” (150). I see Ellison as performing, from a Marxist position, the work that Rayvon Fouché argues African Americans have long done with the technological products of modernity: that is, “produc[ing] meanings for technological artifacts, practices, and knowledge that regularly subvert the constructed meanings of these technological products” (3).

<sup>8</sup> The story was untitled by Ellison and published only posthumously in the collection *Flying Home* (whose editor, John Callahan, gave it its title). Ellison seems to have written the story in the late 1930s (Jackson 195-96).

<sup>9</sup> I here follow Dominick LaCapra's reading of parody as a key rhetorical mechanism in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. LaCapra suggests that the ambiguity of parody in articulating a close if critical affiliation with its object leaves the reader of Marx's text with the suspicion that Marx recognizes the effectiveness of Bonaparte's political maneuvers (288).

<sup>10</sup> Robin Lucy's recent article "'Flying Home': Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and the Black Folk During World War II" is the definitive treatment of Ellison's (and to a lesser extent, Wright's) understanding of black folk culture and identity. Lucy argues that Richard Wright saw the folk as having been negated by modernizing processes of the urban capitalist North: the Great Migration, for Wright, made black folk culture "an element of an unusable past that cannot be translated into modernity" (263). Ellison, however, understands the black folk as having been reinvented in the urban North, a modernization that has negated all the agrarian trappings of Southern black culture except one: "the political strategy of simultaneous identification and confrontation, of unity and withdrawal" (276), which characterized everyday black resistance to Jim Crow and which, as Lucy brilliantly argues, was adapted by the black left in its critical support of the American war effort in World War II. While I see Ellison's folk as naming a much more basic instinct of human action (rather than a particular cultural strategy of resistance), I am indebted to Lucy's masterful synthesis of a coherent, politically-instrumental theory of the black folk from a wide range of Ellison's 1930s and 1940s writings. Finally, my own identification of the "lumpen-folk" as an operative figure in Ellison's work is intended, on one level, to dialogue with Lucy's of the "working-folk," which she introduces to name the modernized refiguration of cultures of resistance in the urban black proletariat (263). The lumpenproletariat, I argue, is a concept much more useful than the proletariat in parsing the emergence of a folk impulse toward revolutionary action out of the fluid conditions of modern American society.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Williams notes that the concept of "folk" is a product of European modernity, a discursive response to industrial society that positions historically-residual cultural practices as modes of authenticity in opposition to "modern popular forms, either of a radical and working-class or of a commercial kind" (136-37). Ellison is in dialogue with this discourse of the folk. He is concerned less with an ethnographic recovery of African-American cultural forms than with appropriating them to underwrite interventions within various aesthetic, social, or political debates. That is, the positivity of Ellison's folk is distanced from any essentialist construction of African-American identity. For example, in his 1958 essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Ellison reassigns the trickster practice of masking from a particular African-American folk practice to the very nexus of a broader American identity (*Collected Essays* 100-112). Throughout his career, Ellison avoids many of the pitfalls of the discourses of African-American authenticity often invoked in the name of the folk. J. Martin Favor and David G. Nicholls offer deconstructions of those discourses and careful readings of the various instrumental presences of the folk—generally as tropes for problems of modernity and authenticity—in African-American literature.

<sup>12</sup> *New Challenge*, launched in 1937 (and only lasting one issue), was a reformatting of the journal *Challenge* to bring it more directly in line with the Communist movement. However, *Challenge* itself was generally pro-Communist, and no great ruptures occur in the journal's pages in 1937. *Challenge* and *New Challenge* are continuous, and together stand as the most important black leftist cultural journal of the 1930s. For an overview of the two journals, see Alan Wald's *Exiles From a Future Time* (267-76).

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Foley has offered the only examination of *Slick* to date in her *Wrestling with the Left*, discussing its combination of elements of proletarian literature, modernism, myth, and psychology. Further, as Foley shows, *Slick* is not the only novel Ellison planned in this period (127-31, 141-9). It does seem, however, to be the one on which he made the most substantial progress.

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<sup>14</sup> Wright's words are skewed by the fact that he seems to have, at times, regarded Ellison as a competitor. For instance, Wright had earlier taken exception to *Slick*, telling Ellison that it too closely imitated his own literary style (Jackson 222, Rampersad 109).

<sup>15</sup> Ellison's notes and drafts contain multiple misspellings and errors. Ellison also, in *Slick*, marks African-American dialect orthographically. I have been conservative in correcting any spelling errors from the manuscripts in my quotation of them here: only in instances where an error is clearly either a typographic error or unmotivated misspelling have I silently amended the prose.

<sup>16</sup> For an account of the involuntary sterilization of African-American women and women from other racial and ethnic groups in the twentieth century, see Angela Davis's *Women, Race & Class* (215-21).

<sup>17</sup> Like Ellison in the late 1930s, Booker is a Marxist who has lived in Harlem, grew up in Oklahoma, and has tried unsuccessfully to fight for the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War. For details of Ellison's attempt to go to Spain, see Rampersad (94-5).

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## Chapter 5

### Lumpenproletarian Science, Lumpenproletarian Blues: *Invisible Man* and the Literary Practice of American Marxism

#### Prologue: What is (African-American) Literary Marxism? Or, Ellison Within and Beyond the Cold War

In *Slick*, Ellison analyzed the material, cultural, and social conditions for revolutionary action in Depression-era America, but his analysis failed to utilize the formal and figurative properties of literary form. I here read *Invisible Man* as a text in which Ellison effectively takes a step back and asks “what would an effective Marxist *novel* look like?” at the same that he asks “what is an effective *Marxist* novel?” His answers are both unusual and idiosyncratic. *Invisible Man*, I argue, resituates the lumpenproletarian figure in offering the identity, procedures, and assumptions of a Marxist literary practice. I thus hope to bridge the divide (so often reiterated by scholarship) between *Invisible Man* and Marxism. I propose that the shift in Ellison’s career that *Invisible Man* constitutes is not necessarily a political shift from radicalism to liberalism (even though within the terms of Cold War discourse, this was perhaps the inevitable way in which the shift would signify) but a shift from theorizing the social and the political, as in *Slick*, to theorizing the formal, representational, and analytical procedures of Marxist writing itself.

This seems like a paradoxical claim. *Invisible Man*, conventional critical wisdom holds, is an exercise in modernist experimentation and the black cultural form of the blues that banishes the stodgy determinism and urban realism of African-American Marxism, which Richard Wright’s work is frequently held to typify. Ellison provided ammunition for this distinction from Wright and, by extension, from literary radicalism. In a 1961 interview, he disassociated himself from Wright on the grounds that he was “less interested in an ideological interpretation of Negro experience” and “felt that Wright was overcommitted to ideology. . . . You might say that I was much less a social

determinist” (*Collected Essays* 74). Terms like “ideological interpretation of Negro experience,” “ideology,” and “social determinist” all limn the contours of a bleak view of African-American life that American and African-American literary studies generally identify as Marxism.

Ironically, though, a persistent association of literary Marxism with referential realism and social-protest naturalism repeats the mistake of Irving Howe’s that Ellison so famously and so deftly critiqued in “The World and the Jug.” Howe, we recall, rebuked James Baldwin and Ellison for abandoning what he saw as the social-protest priority of African-American writing, which he associated with Richard Wright. Ellison takes issue *not* with the notion that a writer should be politically invested, but that a politically-invested *black* writer must produce work that looks like *Native Son*. Howe, Ellison argues, seems to think that Ellison has a racial obligation to go about the literary construction of protest with “‘black’ anger and ‘clenched militancy’” while forswearing any concern with craft, individual experience, and cultural complexity (*Collected Essays* 167). Ellison suggests that Howe simply can’t see the political nature of a novel that doesn’t superficially resemble *Native Son*. Critics need to be equally careful of looking for Marxism in literature only where they expect to find it.

There is no doubt that by 1952, Ellison was at the very least not opposed to being publicly labeled a Cold War liberal anticommunist, nor did he seek to prevent or discourage such interpretations of his fiction and essays. As we’ll see in this chapter, and as Barbara Foley documents much more thoroughly in her study *Wrestling with the Left*, Ellison’s break with the Communist movement (to which he seems to have been firmly committed in the 1930s and early 1940s) was a prolonged and uneven process in which disenchantment with the institutions of the organized left didn’t always—or immediately—translate into non- or anti-Marxist ways of thinking and writing. My argument here thus extends that of the previous chapter: that we can locate a singular Marxist theoretical and literary practice within Ellison’s writing that is impacted by but ultimately autonomous from the discourse and politics of the Communist left. While I reference the history of Ellison’s extra-literary transactions and shifting affiliation with the left, I refuse to let either wholly determine my identification of the Marxism of Ellison’s writing or of his idiosyncratic approach to sociopolitical thought. At the risk of

sounding axiomatic, I reiterate here an assumption that has guided my dissertation throughout: that a novel is not made “Marxist” or “non-Marxist” by its author’s sympathy or antipathy toward the institutional left (nor can an author’s personal sociopolitical priorities be defined solely in these terms, either). *Invisible Man* theorizes a literary treatment of American social ontology designed to furnish both a materialist analysis of American structures of power and an accordant diagnosis for transformative politics. In his practical approach to this project—an approach he both reflected on in the decade leading up to 1952 and described as a “science,” often in conjunction with explicit positive invocations of Marxism—Ellison enacts within literary form the practical, materialist mode of theory Louis Althusser would later describe as definitive of Marxism itself. The operation of Ellison’s Marxism, then, is perhaps clearer in hindsight and at a remove from the politically-charged climate of Cold War political discourse and aesthetics, according to which many of the formal and political strategies of *Invisible Man* would signify as non-radical, anti-totalitarian, or even apolitical. His location within and unavoidable overdetermination by that climate, and his frustrations with the Communist movement, likely prevented Ellison himself from fully seeing that the work he was doing in *Invisible Man* was still Marxist in form.

*Invisible Man* is in many ways a Cold War novel, harmonizing with the period’s liberal consensus in its focus on individualism, anti-realist literary form, and critiques of organized political movements. And as noted above and in the previous chapter, Ellison did make occasional anticommunist and anti-Marxist statements during the postwar period (even though they add up to far less than an unequivocal denunciation of the left). But while Barbara Foley sees *Invisible Man* as a relatively straightforward Cold War liberal text of “existential ambivalence” and “vital center patriotism” (1), I value Thomas Schaub’s claim that *Invisible Man* partakes of many of the tenets of Cold War liberalism yet does so from a position informed by recent African-American historical experiences “very different from those of southern Agrarians and disenchanting white liberals” (91). The specifics of his argument aside, Schaub suggests that the presence of elements of the new liberalism in the novel needs to be evaluated differentially and put in a relationship of negotiation with, rather than accession to, Cold War ideology.

Ellison lacked a language that would locate his postwar efforts within Marxism *while at the same time* against U.S. Communism and proletarian fiction: in the repressive environment of Cold War America—and too often in today’s academy—Marxism, Communism, and literary proletarianism are synonymous. This lack of a conceptual vocabulary for articulating heterodox, inventive forms of Marxism—which in European contexts go by the term “Western Marxism”—accounts, I believe, for the inconsistency between what I see as the Marxist project operating in *Invisible Man*, and Ellison’s extra-literary critiques of Marxism. Beyond Ellison’s work and reputation, then, at stake here is the identity of Marxism itself in American and African-American literature, in the Cold War or in any period. Where do we look for it and what are we looking for? Might it be something besides “clenched militancy” or proletarian realism? Might it be something that cannot be explicated solely by reference to the historically-contingent political terminology of Cold War America?

In a 1948 letter to Wright, written soon after the “Battle Royal” section of *Invisible Man* was published in the British journal *Horizon*, Ellison thanks Wright for his praise of the excerpt, addressing Wright as a literary and intellectual equal throughout. He goes on to provide a clue as to how he understands the developing project of *Invisible Man*. He tells Wright that he is unimpressed with African-American writer Chester Himes’s latest novel, *Lonely Crusade*, a *noir* work dealing with organized labor and the Communist Party. Ellison doesn’t fault the novel for being political in content and orientation, but for not being political in a *literary* manner:

I believe that when one writes of politics one is called upon to do more than cull a few terms from [Lenin’s] Materialism and [Empirio]-criticism and scatter them dialogue-wise between episodes of a cops and robbers plot. . . . After all, if a writer is serious about his politics and its relationship to man, then he should at least attempt to master the ideas (artistic, technical, philosophical, metaphysical, etc.,) which that political position embodies explicitly. And that is only the beginning, for the work of the novelist only begins here, his task is that of giving shape to the implicit which radiate about any philosophical position (and here I include political statements and tactics based upon that philosophy) like the invisible rays projected by a radioactive substance. (1 Feb. 1948)

For Ellison, the proper political work of a literary text is epistemological (rather than didactic or exhortatory), and occurs in the text’s figurative or formal dimensions, where it is consciously crafted or worked over by the writer. An effective political novel does not

“scatter” Marxist terminology in its dialogue or throughout its plot but “[gives] shape” to the implicit, non-rational dimensions of political theory. Literary form and political theory assume a unique relationship, a relationship dictated by the specificities of literary practice itself. Clearly, this problem of relationship was weighing on Ellison’s mind as he wrote *Invisible Man*. But *how* then does a political novel *give shape* to a politics, as opposed to simply culling its politics from non-literary sources? Or in other words, what does Marxist *literary* practice look like and do? As his comparison of the novelist’s work to that of defining the “invisible rays” of radiation suggests, Ellison conceives of the proper “work” of the Marxist and the novelist as a *science*, a term he will often associate with effective epistemological and literary practice in his 1940s writings.

This valorization of science might surprise the reader of *Invisible Man* who is familiar with that novel’s critique of the “science” of the Brotherhood. Here, Louis Althusser’s theory of the scientific character of Marxism can help us understand what Ellison means by a non-pejorative “science” and what a “scientific” practice of committed literature might be. Althusser’s signal contribution to Marxism was to define it as scientific, by which he meant to compare it to the epistemologically-superior and non-ideological character of findings in the natural sciences. But this project was carried out by Althusser in the 1960s against the orthodoxy of international Communism and the French Communist Party, as well as against earlier theorizations of Marxist scientificity formulated by Engels and Stalin. Orthodox Communism, taking its cues from Engels and Stalin, claimed that Marxism was a “science” because it offered the hidden, real explanation of all phenomena or events. *That* Marxist science—the “science” of the Brotherhood, which Ellison increasingly comes to see as the bad “Marxism” of the American Communist Party—was actually ideological, Althusser insisted, because it reduced the concrete multiplicity and singularity of historical conjunctures to mere reflections of static, ideal laws. As invisible man remarks of his time with the Brotherhood: “We recognized no loose ends, everything could be controlled by our science” (382). This pseudo-scientific Marxism is incapable of changing anything: it can only recognize various forms of the same, and, as invisible man will discover, it is blind to the ragged “loose ends” of social and cultural complexity that enable revolutionary praxis. For Althusser, Marxism’s scientific quality is instead premised upon its ability to

produce the new. In the words of Alain Badiou, Althusser's science "is a process of *transformation*, ideology . . . is a process of *repetition*" (qtd. in Elliott 83). The task Althusser set himself was to describe the generic procedures that made Marxism a scientific practice of transformation that could be put to work (in varying ways) in the relatively autonomous practical domains of society such as art, literature, politics, economics, and philosophy.

Ellison, like Althusser, insisted on the need to theorize "scientific" practices of literature, politics, and social analysis. Many of the epistemological theoretical labors Althusser carried out in French philosophy in the 1960s were already carried out by Ellison in American contexts in the 1940s. *Invisible Man* deals directly with the definition of a scientific or Marxist practice of literature, the means by which literature can "[give] shape" to the new, first in literary terms and then, ultimately, in sociohistorical terms. The novel looks for the "loose ends" of modernity and finds them on the ragged fringes of the social fabric, associated with the people and places of the underworld lumpenproletariat. Lumpen types in Ellison's 1930s fiction were endowed with revolutionary political capacity. In *Invisible Man*, they are the figures of authentic Marxist science itself, a science in opposition to the ideology of the Brotherhood. Scientific criteria of Marxism are often what, in Ellison's writings, distinguish Marxism proper from the policies of the Communist Party. And the criteria of a scientific Marxist practice of literature allow him to distinguish between effective and ineffective committed writing, as he does with Himes's novel. In Ellison's work, Marxist politics, epistemology, and effective committed literature are all tied together under the rubric of scientific (revolutionary) *productive practice*. As he wrote to Wright in 1941, science's purchase on reality is defined not by empirical correspondence, but by productive transformation: "To controll [sic] reality the scientist must be able to manipulate it, to weigh and balance it, to test it. This is also necessary for the writer when he approaches experience—and for the scientific politician as well" (3 Nov. 1941). In Ellison's work, this transformative sense of science generally goes by the name of the blues.

In the first section below, I introduce Althusser's account of Marxism as a theory of scientific practice. Althusser's understanding of practice serves as a useful paradigm for describing the productive, as opposed to the reflective, work of committed literary

labor. In other words, it moves literary commitment away from content-based (workers, strikes, etc.) and extra-literary (authorial political or class position) criteria, and toward a work's practical formal and epistemological project. Althusser's at times opaque theory of science is helpfully illuminated by—as it itself explicates—Ellison's idiosyncratic understanding of science, literary practice, and the conjoined aesthetic and epistemological program of the blues.

I then turn to Ellison's work of the 1940s where, I argue, he used his literary criticism and essays to think through a scientific Marxist literary practice. His thought was also informed by debate and discussion on the left around the decade's most controversial leftist novels, Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and John Steinbeck's *The Moon is Down* (1942).<sup>1</sup> In the final section of the chapter, I move to a reading of *Invisible Man* itself. Equipped with a new narrative of the 1940s prehistory of the novel, we can read this overly-familiar novel from a new perspective. Once we position *Invisible Man* at the end of a literary and intellectual trajectory that differs greatly from the established one of Ellison's rejection of Marxism, *Invisible Man* starts to look rather different. It takes on a new *object*: the procedures and guiding assumptions of Marxist practice in *both* literary production (how to write an effective politically-committed novel) and political strategy (how to go about utopian social transformation).<sup>2</sup>

### **Althusser and Ellison: Science, Marxism, and the Blues**

Ellison offers a rejoinder to Irving Howe in “The World and the Jug” that should guide literary critics in their reading and interpretation of politically-engaged texts. He responds to Howe's charge that the material social realities of American racism are “apparently” absent from *Invisible Man* by suggesting that this is because “I tried to the best of my ability to transform these elements into art. My goal was not to escape or hold back, but to work through; to transcend, as the blues transcend the painful conditions with which they deal. The protest is there not because I was helpless before my racial condition, but because *I put it there*” (*Collected Essays* 183, emphasis added). Committed writing doesn't emerge from necessity, Ellison insists: it is neither the product of determining conditions nor the moral and political responsibility of writers from marginalized identities. Effective “protest” novels are the products of conscious practice

on the writer's part, texts in which the author tries to *do* something with the raw materials of sociohistorical conditions. But what does that practice consist of? How should a writer go about transforming political priorities into art? These questions occupy Ellison in the decade leading up to *Invisible Man*.

As he does here, Ellison frequently invokes the blues as a figure for this transformative practice: the blues singer and the novelist both work over something (experience, loss, social conditions, political theories) that is prior to that act of expressive work. Critics have equated Ellison's interest in the blues with a Cold War-era rejection of political radicalism, a move away from a politics of collective struggle toward an American or African-American cultural expression of individual experience and emotion.<sup>3</sup> Yet Angela Davis has argued persuasively for the social orientation of the blues as a form despite its typically personal content. She defines the blues as "experience as emotionally configured by an individual psyche, historically shaped by post-Civil War conditions." Furthermore, she insists that "[b]lack people's inflected appropriation of this term ["the blues"] did not make such a rigorous distinction between a subjective, psychological state of depression and an objective, socially defined status of oppression" (112-13). As a subjective willed transformation of the socially objective into a new form, the blues cannot be cast as the apolitical counterpart of committed artistic practice. I argue that the blues is how Ellison conceives what is also a Marxist practice of thought and aesthetics, one conceived apart from the Communist Party and keyed to the transformative labor of the creative literary artist. As we saw in the previous chapter, Ellison's "folk" is a non-essentialist paradigm for the irrepressible political capacity of individuals; similarly, his blues, while drawing on the black cultural specificity of the form, ultimately describes the very socially-transformative practice of engaged writing.

To make this argument, I draw on what is perhaps the most basic or foundational of Louis Althusser's theses: his definition of *practice*, and his identification of Marxism with *scientific* practice. The idea of Marxism as a science is one with some nightmarish historical baggage: Soviet prescriptions of "proletarian" correctness in the arts and natural sciences, and complicity with the dehumanizing operations of technological modernity. But Althusser carried out his intervention precisely against those nightmares, seeking a Marxist science independent of normative Communism. Science was an

equally central term for Ellison. In his 1944 review of Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*, Ellison expressed the need for a "deeper science" than bourgeois sociology to understand the race problem in America. He also critiqued the Communist and New Deal lefts for lacking "scientific knowledge of the subtleties of Negro-white relations" (*Collected Essays* 334, 340). If we're to understand this privileged invocation of science, we need to take another look at Althusser's idiosyncratic theory of Marxist science.

To begin with, Althusser helps us see how Ellison could be critical of the Communist Party—which also claimed "scientific" authority for its positions—from a Marxist position. In Althusser's writings, Stalinist orthodoxy and Hegelian or idealist philosophy are two versions of the same ideological tendency: the prohibition of theoretical production. Stalinism "literally sacrifice[d] and block[ed] all development of Marxist-Leninist theory; it effectively ignored all the indispensable conditions for theoretical reflection and research and, with the suspicion it cast on any theoretical novelty, dealt a very serious blow in practice to the freedom of scientific research and its discovery" (*Philosophy* 21). Hegel—Althusser's name for all brands of idealism—imposes the "ideological model" of Spirit (what Althusser calls "the movement of the Idea") on thought and "fails to see the real, qualitative differences and transformations, the essential discontinuities which constitute the very process of theoretical practice" (*For Marx* 189). Ideology is this imposition of a pseudo-"scientific" answer to all problems that cancels the possibility of innovation and reinforces the dogmatic authority of one's own position. Based on his time with the Brotherhood, invisible man might well agree with Althusser's claim that the "science" of Communist orthodoxy is merely the reiteration of "Famous Quotations" from the Marxist canon (*For Marx* 27).

Althusser approached the problem of Marxist science instead from the perspective of practice and production. Marxism is scientific not because of what it holds or proclaims, but because of what it does. Althusser defined Marxism's scientific character on three peculiar grounds: it is non-empirical, it is practical and productive, and it is open to continual development, revision, and innovation. These paradoxical criteria derive from Althusser's central concept of practice, or a generic process by which a raw material is transformed under a specific means of production into a new product. Practice is a theory of ontology itself in Althusser: for instance, he defines the social as the complex

unity of various arenas of relatively autonomous practice (politics, the economy, ideology, and theory). Within each practice, there are ideological and scientific forms of that practice. The former serves the interests of the state and ruling class in reinforcing the immutability of existing conditions, while the latter is scientific to the extent that it breaks from those conditions, producing radically new objects. The end of a scientific practice is always revolutionary, always to produce something new and non-coincident with the raw materials with which the practice begins (hence, it by definition cannot reflect or merely describe those materials). For example, scientific political practice—Marxist revolutionary politics—takes existing social relations and produces utterly new social relations. Ideological practice, on the other hand, works toward the end of reinforcing the status quo. Its products may seem new, but they are merely new iterations of the same, identical to its raw materials. Liberal political practice, for instance, might win legal and juridical recognition for formerly marginalized identities, but in doing so it reproduces a social system in which subjectivity is defined in ideological terms of state participation, citizenship, etc. Science is thus always aligned by Althusser with the ruptural, the novel, and the innovative. And as a certain approach to practice in any given social domain, it is not just a means of valorizing the hard objectivity of the natural sciences or the cold determinacy of structuralism. Rather, it is productive in the most truly generative and generic sense of the term—it *makes* the revolutionary.

By defining Marxism as the science of theoretical production, Althusser positioned it as a guide for the establishment of scientific practices in other social fields, potentially including literary craft. Althusser performed for Marxist philosophy what Ellison sought to do for literature: make it epistemologically secure, formally-distinct, and conducive to revolution. To begin to see how a non-referential, symbolic text like *Invisible Man* can be located within rather than against Marxism, we need to lay out the logic by which Althusser proceeded in his task. Marxism is a scientific philosophy because it produces concepts that are revolutionary in nature: they are both unprecedented and non-empirical, and capable of aiding in the transformation of reality. By contrast, ideological theoretical practice—the mode of thought of vulgar “Marxists,” idealists, empiricists, and sociological analysts—Althusser defined as merely reflecting or describing existing reality, contributing to its appearance of inevitability and

benefitting the interests of the state and the ruling class. Ideology generally provides an “accurate” account of the appearance of reality—it is not fantasy or abstraction, as a traditional Marxist might hold—but its ideological character lies in its being unable to transform that reality. Hence, Althusser argued that ideology serves not the end of knowledge, but of ensuring social domination: it is epistemologically bankrupt *because* it is reflective. Science, on the other hand, is objectively valid because it is non-reflective and non-corresponding to an extra-theoretical reality, and because its aim is revolutionary transformation.

Althusser never managed a full justification of this theorization of Marxist science. Why, for instance, is non-reflectivity a criteria of scientific validity? How can a theory be judged scientific without some measure of correspondence to extra-theoretical principles? How can it effect the transformation of reality if its concepts have no referent in reality? Althusser did offer multiple suggestive theses in defense of this argument, three of which concern our reading of Ralph Ellison and *Invisible Man*.

First, because revolution is always the ultimate objective for Althusser, the concepts of Marxist theory are abstract, generative, and politically accommodating: they are not descriptions of reality, but tools designed to facilitate the changing of reality. They thus maintain a relationship to reality without being coincident with any historical, concrete object. Concepts are protocols for understanding concrete objects and contingent situations non-ideologically, with an eye toward transforming them. Scientific theoretical practice “possesses the specific capacity to provide the theoretical instruments indispensable to the concrete [scientific] knowledge of a whole series of possible real-concrete objects.” One of Althusser’s favorite examples is Marx’s *Capital*, which he argues does not describe a specific capitalist society actually existing in history but produces the abstract concept of the *capitalist mode of production*, which can in turn help the Marxist to scientifically understand the workings of, and identify methods of transforming, any given capitalist society (*Philosophy* 51, 49-50). Similarly, Althusser argues that Lenin does not merely describe the Russian Revolution in his 1917 writings. Rather, Lenin uses the historical occasion to formulate the concept of the *conjuncture*—the singular arrangement of forces and contradictions structuring a given historical moment—as a tool for revolutionaries faced with the task of organizing political action in

any given conjuncture (*For Marx* 176-80). These concepts remain abstract and, because they are original products of theory and aim to change empirical reality, they have no empirical referent in and of themselves.

Secondly, Althusser associates ideology with the apparent order of reality as it presents itself spontaneously to the subject. This is what he calls the “double relation” of ideology (*Philosophy* 23): it is both the other of science *and* indistinguishable from the immediate reality of social experience. Empirical “knowledge” of reality cannot be scientific since it contributes to the ideological end of shoring up the apparent immutability of repressive social arrangements. The empirical is “cross-bred with a powerful strain of ideology concealed behind its ‘obviousness’” (Althusser and Balibar 110). As the other of ideology, science is also non-coincident with the empirical: “a science, far from reflecting the immediate givens of everyday experience and practice, is constituted only on the condition of calling them into question, and breaking with them, to the extent that its results, once achieved, appear indeed as the contrary of the obvious facts of practical everyday experience, rather than as their reflection” (*Philosophy* 15).

Finally, a science is by definition in need of continual development. Since “Marxist science” neither names the “given” nor consists of “a set of finished truths,” it is neither empiricist nor dogmatic, which Althusser thought of as related deviations (*Philosophy* 14). Think of Communist orthodoxy (or Ellison’s Brotherhood) with its claim to have achieved total “scientific” mastery of the real (empiricism) and thus to require no further development or research (dogmatism). To quote Gregory Elliott: “the basic thrust of Althusser’s philosophical intervention within Marxism was to highlight its incompleteness—what remained to be done” (91). If Marxist theory does not develop, Althusser warns, it becomes merely “dead ‘obvious facts,’ like machines without workers, no longer even machines but things.” In short, when science loses its productive character it loses its ability to act within concrete, changing historical conjunctures: “*Marxist theory can fall behind history, and even behind itself, if ever it believes that it has arrived*” (*Philosophy* 230, emphasis original).

Althusser thus positions the creativity, transformative power, and unforeseeable course of productive practice as the form of Marxism in any field or arena. He understands production much like Bertolt Brecht did, when he told Walter Benjamin that

Soviet literary critics “are quite simply enemies of production. Production makes them uneasy. It can’t be trusted. It is the unpredictable. You never know where it will end. And they themselves do not want to produce. They want to play the *apparatchik* and supervise others” (Benjamin 216). Althusser’s project is a bold attempt to unite a non-relativist and non-correspondence account of knowledge with the practical end of revolution.<sup>4</sup>

Althusser usefully explicates Ellison’s own idiosyncratic investment in the relationship of epistemological and aesthetic priorities. Ellison theorizes a “science” of literary practice that is eminently practical, a conscious, *transformative* labor of production upon the raw materials of history (personal and social experiences, historical events and realities) within literary form. It follows that scientific literary practice will then 1) be non-empirical in its representational protocols; 2) offer abstract insights that are not wholly contingent on the real circumstances from which they are derived; 3) meet certain criteria of epistemological political usefulness; and 4) employ the specific instruments of *literary* practice, by which Ellison means not just formal and symbolic devices, but also those areas of experience that resist empirical documentation but that literature is situated to grasp: the internal, the psychological, the irrational. Juxtaposed with Althusser, the abstractions, anti-realism, and complex symbolic economies of *Invisible Man* look very different in that their underlying theoretical orientation can be seen as something other than high modernist aesthetics or Cold War liberalism. They instead become elements of a new literary Marxism.

Both Ellison and Althusser are peculiar among modern thinkers in that they valorize science without romantic or anti-Enlightenment hesitation. Paul Thomas critiques Althusser for ignoring “the downside of scientific advance” and falling prey to the Enlightenment equation of science, technological advance, and rationalized domination (124-7). Yet neither Ellison nor Althusser reproduces, in his work, the frightening mechanization and destructive ethos of technology. As Ellison’s work makes clear, both redeploy science as a labor *upon* the technological advances of modernity. In the previous chapter, we saw how Ellison used technological objects to represent the objective given conditions of modern American society, conditions which in themselves are neither liberatory nor domineering, but which are the site of revolutionary struggle. There, I addressed how Ellison sees technology facilitating totalizing epistemological

work and collective political practice. In 1944, Ellison described the U.S. as “technologically advanced and scientifically alert” (*Collected Essays* 335): technology is a given, science is a potential course of action. A year earlier, Ellison had argued that black leaders in America needed to harness the technological advances of World War II and “[define] the relation between the increasing innovations in technology and the Negro peoples’ political and economic survival and advancement” (“Editorial Comment” 301). And when he read Wright’s 1941 folk history of African Americans, *12 Million Black Voices*, Ellison wrote to Wright that the book gave him “a pride which springs from the realization that after all the brutalization, starvation, and suffering, we have begun to embrace the experience and master it. And we shall make of it a weapon more subtle than a machinegun, more effective than a fighter plane!” Wright’s book, Ellison continued, provided “something to build upon” for his own writing and has made him “a better Marxist” (3 Nov. 1941). The stakes of science, for Althusser and Ellison, are that without it we’re unable to reclaim technology from the service of mass death, unable to turn the guns around in the name of a better world. An espousal of science is the form of both Althusser and Ellison’s anti-Enlightenment critique.

In Ellison’s 1940s writings, “the blues,” “science,” and “Marxism” all name a productive practice of *putting* the protest in literature, of using literature as an epistemologically-secure guide to the urgent needs of transformative, utopian political practice. And this literary adoption of the blues is formulated in opposition to the Communist Party, not as an alternative to Marxist radicalism. To be an effective or “scientific” practitioner of revolutionary literature, Ellison—like his protagonist in *Invisible Man*—had to go from black and red to black and blue.

The primary reason for both Ellison and Wright’s disillusionment with the Party in the 1940s (and Algren’s, we recall) was its sacrificing of anti-racist and anti-capitalist politics to a wholehearted support of the Allied effort in World War II. Years later, Ellison would famously declare of this period: “The Communists recognized no plurality of interests and were really responding to the necessities of Soviet foreign policy, and when the war came, Negroes got caught and were made expedient in the shifting of policy” (*Collected Essays* 748). But this disappointment in the Communist Party was not, at the time, a rejection of the priorities of Marxism. What “Negroes got caught” in during

World War II was not some cynical manipulation of African-Americans essential to Marxism itself, but the opportunism of the Communist movement. As we saw in chapter two, in “responding to the necessities of Soviet foreign policy,” the Party jettisoned Marxist politics: it downplayed activism against Jim Crow, strikes in military industries, or any other tactic that might disrupt the war effort.

Ellison wrote to Wright in August 1945 that the Party was plagued by “easy, sheep-like belief, vacuity and lack of thought.” It had become ideological because it no longer engaged in the productive work of Marxist practice. But now, he continues, the introduction of the atom bomb has renewed his sense of political urgency: “We’ve got to do something, to offset the C.P. sell-out of our people; and I mean by this, both Negroes and labor. With such power in the world there is no answer for Negroes certainly except some sort of classless society.” How to go about conceiving this non-Communist, interracial, *Marxist* project? “[G]ive me the naked, cold realism of the blues, it’s the basic bed-rock of any clearheaded approach to such events” (5 Aug. 1945). The blues is a practice of theoretical production that is scientific in Althusser’s sense: both epistemologically objective and politically revolutionary, based not on a “sheep-like belief” in dogma but on an inventive commitment to the post-class utopian future.

It might sound, from this letter, that the literary form of the blues is just a hardboiled Marxist realism that disregards the Communist line. But Ellison sets himself a much harder task, because his blues are *not* empirical: their “cold realism” involves working over reality. The blues artist doesn’t just see things as they are but works to *produce* knowledge of things as they are. In his review of Wright’s *Black Boy* in the 1945 essay “Richard Wright’s Blues,” Ellison defines the blues as “an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness” not by merely recounting that experience, but by “squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.” He emphasizes the difference between the catastrophe’s expression and the catastrophe itself, a difference crystallized in the labor of lyricism, an effort of “squeezing.” In the same essay, Ellison refers to “the transforming, concept-creating activity of the brain”—the blues are the aesthetic form of that conceptual work. Althusser’s distinction of transformative science from reflective ideology thus makes

clear the defining element of the blues for Ellison: *practice*, with equal emphasis on the discipline of self-training, technical mastery, and productivity. (*Collected Essays* 129, 139).

The blues is a guide for action, but it provides no easy solutions or ready-made political formulas. It is a practice, not a dogma. It is not, for that, apolitical: “Nowhere in America today is there social or political action based upon the solid realities of Negro life” as depicted in the blues practice of *Black Boy*, Ellison observes (*Collected Essays* 143-44). This is because a blues politics, to adequately grasp those solid realities, must resist the conservatism inherent in institutional form and the theoretical inertia of orthodoxy. Hence, Ellison will utilize, in *Invisible Man*, the figurative value of the transient, placeless, exceptional lumpenproletariat for signifying the blues practice of Marxism. In doing so, he taps into a figurative nexus of American literature, African-American culture, the lumpen figure, the blues, and Marxism.

One of Ellison’s favorite novels, *Huckleberry Finn*, offers American literature’s paradigmatic romantic incarnation of the lumpenproletarian figure.<sup>5</sup> At the start of his eponymous novel, Huck is an uneasy member of Tom Sawyer’s robbers’ gang. Because Huck is socially marginal—he has no family that the gang can murder if Huck divulges their secrets—the gang doesn’t entirely trust him. The lumpenproletariat’s social unmooring makes political institutions or organizations suspicious of its loyalties, precisely because its mobility frustrates control. Tom Sawyer is very concerned with authority as he dictates to the gang just how they’ll go about “robbery and murder” and the work of “ransoming” captives. Tom’s authority is based not on the concrete conjuncture, but on dogma, on Famous Quotations from adventure books. He doesn’t know what “ransoming” means, but “I’ve seen it in books,” he declares, “and so of course that’s what we’ve got to do” (21). Later, Huck Finn is skeptical that a Sunday-school picnic Tom intends to raid is actually, as Tom insists (mistakenly citing *Don Quixote* as his authority), an Arab caravan disguised by magicians. After the gang is beaten off by the Sunday-school teacher, Huck concludes: “It had all the marks of a Sunday school” (24-26). Tom is so beholden to Famous Quotations (that he doesn’t actually understand) that he can’t see a Sunday school for a Sunday school: he wants it to be an Arab Caravan. Like a Stalinist or Hegelian, he forces the complexity and

unpredictability of reality into pre-written “scientific” molds. By doing so, he leads his gang into ideology and ineffectiveness. “We played robber about a month, and then I resigned,” Huck declares. “All the boys did. We hadn’t robbed nobody, we hadn’t killed any people, but only just pretended” (24). As a critique of the robbers’ gang from a pro-robbing position, Huck’s complaint resembles Ellison’s own critiques of the Communist Party in the 1940s, and Althusser departs from Twain only in defining empiricism as equally ideological: reality, Althusser would insist, is concrete yet complexly totalized and thus not available to mere sensual observation. Marxist science is the production of new concepts that enable one to understand the actuality of social formations and processes—to, in effect, see a Sunday school in its full, complex reality and to be better prepared to make the political decision to either rob it or hold off for a bigger prize. Like the blues, Marxism must produce the truth of experience and the possibility of its overcoming out of the raw materials of that experience.

The blues are above all practical, inventive, and mobile, an aesthetic form of Huck’s own marginal freedom. As Houston Baker writes, the “blues are always nomadically wandering. Like the freight-hopping hobo, they are ever on the move, ceaselessly summing novel experience.” Hence, “only a *trained* voice can sing the blues”: it is a form defined by mobility and practice within modernity (8). The blues singer thus resembles Althusser’s scientific Marxist, who in one account is compared to a hobo who “gets on to a moving train without knowing either where it is coming from or where it is going” (*Future* 217). Althusser’s hobo Marxist is a romantic lumpen figure like Huck, someone whose exteriority (to passenger status, to codified theoretical doctrines, to Party discipline) equips him to produce the new. And as Eric Sundquist observes, “the train itself, the vehicle of migration and a charged icon of escape, salvation, and transcendence in the tradition of black spirituals and the blues, is inherently a vibrant field of African-American cultural meanings” (*Hammers* 11). But the train, as a symbol of modernity (like Ellison’s atom bomb, fighter planes, and machine guns), is also an instrument of oppression, claimed by Jim Crow (*Plessy v. Ferguson*) and bearing African-Americans into industrial servitude in the North. If the revolutionary potential of modern technology is to be appropriated for utopian rather than repressive ends, a blues Marxism must theorize “political action based on the solid realities of

Negro life” and not simply reflect or document those realities. This, in essence, is *Invisible Man*’s project. Ellison’s blues are a scientific practice of Marxist aesthetics; Althusser’s Marxism is a philosophical articulation of the fluid discipline of the blues.

Ellison states the need for this blues Marxism at the end of *Invisible Man*, in his protagonist’s vision of his castration by Brother Jack, Emerson, Bledsoe, Norton, and Ras, and the display of his severed testicles from an “armored bridge.” Pointing to them, he informs these representatives of institutional dogmatism “there’s your universe, and that drip-drop upon the water you hear is all the history you’ve made, all you’re going to make. Now laugh, you scientists. Let’s hear you laugh!” But at this point the bridge comes alive, “striding like a robot, an iron man, whose iron legs clanged doomfully as it moved. And then I struggled up, full of sorrow and pain, shouting, ‘No, no, we must stop him!’” (569-70). The codified “sciences” (dogmas) of Brotherhood (Jack), The College (Bledsoe), Northern liberalism (Norton), American individualism (Emerson) and black nationalism (Ras) cannot alter the destructive power of modernity. For they are “free of illusion,” meaning that they are, in Brecht’s term, “enemies of production” and like Tom Sawyer with the Sunday school, so certain of possessing truth that they are awash in doctrinal illusion: castrated, sterile, incapable of action. In John S. Wright’s terms, they are “mis-leaders” who are “rigid, robotized, automatic types . . . incapable of conceiving the world in all its fluid reality, much less of transforming it creatively” (114-15). And like Tom in the notorious farce that is *Huckleberry Finn*’s ending, each is invested more in the performance than the reality of emancipation—each fears or cannot comprehend the possibility of creating something new. Only invisible man, grasping toward a blues science of “sorrow and pain,” realizes the importance of practice, the ever-pressing urgency of renewing the “what is to be done?” question.

### **What Did I Do To Be So Black And Blue?: Towards a Theory of Literary Practice**

The U.S. Communist literary left of the 1930s and 1940s was as committed to theorizing effective literary practice as it was to producing revolutionary texts themselves, and leftist critics “entertained quite a broad range of conceptions of what proletarian literature might be and do” (Foley, *Radical* 168). Strike novels and naturalist protest fiction may have been common in the period, but writers on the left generally

engaged in much more experimentation, and energized a much broader range of influences and resources, than we might assume. In forums at literary conferences and in essays and book reviews, leftist critics variously tackled the questions to which the encounter of U.S. literary traditions with Communism had given rise: what is the revolutionary role or capacity of literature? Can one write as a Marxist without compromising craft or political acuity? Ellison partook in these discussions, and the literary methods of *Invisible Man* derive from them. In general, Ellison was concerned with the productive as opposed to reflective function of radical literature, and the necessity of a text's maintaining a perspective of abstract distance from the immediacy of its subject matter. Both criteria, he thought, enabled a text to undertake epistemological work, which he understood as the proper task of committed literature.

In a lengthy 1941 review of African-American literature in the *New Masses*, his earliest major work of criticism, Ellison distinguished these criteria as “an improvement and modernization of technique and enlargement of theme” (“Recent” 22). By “technique,” Ellison references the “technical experimentation” of high modernist writers. But he refuses to identify specific techniques—say, stream of consciousness, or narrative fragmentation—as necessarily conducive to the needs of a radical writer. In keeping with his general understanding of the objectivity of technology as a mere given, there are no formal *literary* techniques that, in Ellison's eyes, themselves guarantee political effectiveness.<sup>6</sup> To insist otherwise would be to fall into the trap of a sterile prescriptive aesthetics. In fact, in this essay and elsewhere he generally refuses to specify techniques in question. Instead, open-ended technical experimentation allows a writer to break free from realist documentation or reflection and *craft* new insights into social processes and African-American experience. By theme, Ellison refers to a generally Marxist worldview, but one that is less exhortatory than historical. A Marxist perspective, for Ellison, is essentially a matter of scale: Marxist theory occurs on the totalized scale of broad historical processes and shifts, a scale that a text must work toward through the particularities of its setting, plot, or local concerns. In 1941, he associated this abstract or universal perspective with the new “working-class awareness” of the black folk, their entrance—facilitated by the Depression—into the urban North, industrial labor, and the global social entity of modern capitalism. “Negro communities sprouted picket lines,” he

writes of the previous decade, “and shouted slogans showing an awareness of the connection between world events and Negro lives” (“Recent” 23).

Nearly all contemporary black writers, Ellison concludes, fail to synthesize technique and theme and fail to attain the “awareness” reached by the black masses. For instance, he commends Zora Neale Hurston for “technical competence” but insists that without the totalizing perspective of Marxism, her work is merely “calculated burlesque.” Waters Edward Turpin has selected, for his historical fiction, appropriate-scale historical themes (the Great Migration, the industrialization of the folk), but he fails to theorize these concerns “around a clearly defined set of assumptions” and has a “tendency to cling to obsolete technical devices.” He ends the essay by imploring black writers to master their practical grasp of technique and theme. This essay appeared in August of 1941, a few months after the Nazi invasion of Russia moved the American Communist Party to a pro-war position about which Ellison was at best ambivalent, and before U.S. entry into the war eased the economic strain of the Depression. “For the conscious writer,” he accordingly argues, “these are times for intense study; times, for those who see beyond the present chaos, of great themes” (“Recent” 24, 26). African-American literature is enabled, by the historical conjuncture, to be epistemologically generative and politically instrumental, *if* technique and theme are mastered. But how can this be done? Ellison’s answers here (for instance, “the mastery of life through the mastery of the intense ways of thinking and feeling that are artistic techniques” [“Recent” 26]) are vague, partially because, I argue, he hadn’t yet any concrete answers. He was setting a task as much for himself as he was for his contemporaries: the task of articulating a scientific practice of literary production. In fact, in his very first publication, Ellison announced himself to the literary world with that project. His 1937 review of Waters Turpin’s *These Low Grounds* argues that the political “responsibility” of the black writer at this historical moment is to “utilize yet transcend his immediate environment and grasp the historic process as a whole, and his, and his group’s relation to it. This cannot be accomplished with dull sensibilities, or by lagging in the cultural, technical or political sense” (“Creative” 91). Ellison’s famous 1965 formulation that black writers must master their *craft* through “a very stern discipline” was already central to his theorizing of Marxist writing (*Collected Essays* 757).

In stressing the importance of theoretical productivity and technical experimentation, Ellison echoes many of the claims laid down in Richard Wright's 1937 "Blueprint for Negro Writing." While primarily arguing for the location of the revolutionary potential of the black masses in folkloric and nationalist structures of feeling and directing black writers toward that potential, Wright's essay nonetheless insists on experimentation to a degree that belies his reputation as an angry writer of aesthetically-poor protest. "Every iota of gain in human thought and sensibility should be grist for [the black writer's] mill," he declares. Furthermore, black writers must maintain "the autonomy of craft": they must seek to accomplish political theory within the specific formal parameters of literature and avoid "submerg[ing]" the "artistic sense" beneath "a load of didactic material." Wright understands autonomous craft to entail non-realistic techniques, arguing that the "relationship between reality and the artistic image is not always direct and simple." Writers' work should be Marxist in orientation, but Marxism is primarily a capacity for invention and a thematic perspective for Wright. Marxism is a "conception of reality and society" that "endows the writer with a sense of dignity," but it is "but the starting point" for formal experimentation and theoretical exploration. The latter is the ultimate function of committed writing: "to theorize, to speculate, to wonder out of what materials can a human world be built" (60, 63, 60, 65).

This focus on craft, experimentation, thematic complexity, abstraction, and non-realism—what is often described as an anti-Marxist aestheticism in *Invisible Man*—was established in black Communist literary discourse. Edward Bland, a black Communist critic who influenced Ellison, argued that white racism had damaged both the aesthetic and political capacities of black writing, which for Bland were actually one and the same thing. One of the manifestations of that impoverishment, he found, was a simplistic didactic or propagandistic urge in much black writing at the expense of truly useful epistemological insight. Harlem Renaissance writers, for instance, were weak in aesthetic technique and intellectual acuity because "[t]heir object was not to entertain or to throw the searchlight of understanding on the riddle of existence, but to make other Americans see their suffering" ("Social Forces" 243). Because black subjects are invisible to the white gaze of racism, which can see them as only members of a racial group, black poets have internalized the conviction that blacks are "an alien in and not a component part of

society.” Hence, their work suffers from “[a] provincial view of life and an intensely slanted approach” (“Racial Bias” 332, 328).<sup>7</sup> Wright and Bland’s examples suggest that the post-Communist Ellison’s emphasis on technical discipline, non-realistic abstraction, and epistemological complexity is in fact continuous with black Communist discourse. The problem of a science of Marxist literature, for Ellison and for his like-minded critical comrades, was a practical problem of *how* an author sets to work, *how* an author uses literary techniques to transform a subject matter into politically-constructive knowledge.

Ellison, following Wright, was skeptical that realism could further that project. Wright in his “Blueprint” warned that a “simple literary realism” that depicts black life “devoid of wider social connotations . . . must of necessity do a rank injustice to the Negro people” by hampering them “in the struggle for freedom” (59). Realism or mimesis was associated in Ellison’s mind with the *limitation* of a work’s formal and epistemological ambit. It meant that a writer was so tied to depicting the specifics of a chosen subject matter that he or she couldn’t produce any new directions, either in form or political theory. The writer’s work was merely an isolated picture, an escape rather than a guide. Or the writer might unwittingly be led to epistemological inaccuracies. Ellison employs this critique in two early 1940s reviews.

In 1940, he reviewed Langston Hughes’s autobiography *The Big Sea*. He faults Hughes for not abstracting from the facts of his past and analyzing and theorizing them. As a result, “a deeper unity is lost. This is that unity which is formed by the mind’s brooding over experience and transforming it into conscious thought.” It is the labor a writer performs on experience, not the content of the experience itself, that constitutes an effective practice of writing. For by not abstracting from the immediacy of his content, Hughes denies other black writers an instructive *theory* of “the processes by which a sensitive Negro attains a heightened consciousness of a world in which most of the odds are against his doing so” (“Stormy” 20, 21). Instead, Hughes offers only a portrait of his own life: a lively read but nothing more. Similar concerns animate his review of William Attaway’s 1941 *Blood on the Forge*, a novel about three brothers who leave the agricultural South for industrial labor in a Northern steel mill. Ellison praises the novel’s choice of theme—the modernization of the folk—and its depiction of the oral and cultural forms of black folk culture. However, Attaway fails in not moving the novel’s

perspective far enough away from the experiences of its main characters, who fail to come to class consciousness in the North and are simply ground down by capital's oppressions. As a result, the novel fails to encompass the incorporation of the black folk into industrial society. Attaway had a chance to theorize the processes by which the folk can become proletarianized and politically energized, but he missed it. "Attaway grasped the destruction of the folk, but missed its rebirth on a higher level" as a modern proletariat. Because the war has made understanding the precise location of blacks in American modernity of the utmost importance, "works like *Blood on the Forge* [must] be more than a summation of phases of the Negro people's aching past: they must be a guide and discipline for the future" ("Transition" 90, 91). In its realistic attention to the details of northern migration, labor practices, and folkways, the novel limits itself to its local circumstances and fails to totalize, theorize, instruct, and politically enable.

All of these concerns came to light in the furor on the left that surrounded the publication of Wright's *Native Son*, the literary event of 1940 (and perhaps of the decade). The novel was published on March 1—Ellison's twenty-seventh birthday, a coincidence he would not have overlooked. Ellison was very close to Wright at the time and had read the drafts of *Native Son* as they came out of Wright's typewriter. Wright demonstrated for Ellison a practical approach to literary technique: "He talked about it not in terms of mystification but as writing know-how" (*Collected Essays* 73). Not surprisingly, in his 1941 *New Masses* review of black writing, Wright is Ellison's only example of a black writer who had successfully combined theme and technical experimentation. *Native Son* is "the first philosophical novel by an American Negro," marked by both "artistry" and "penetration of thought" ("Recent" 22).

But not all leftists shared Ellison's opinion. The question of the novel's correspondence to extra-literary reality was front and center in critiques of the novel from the left. While as many Communists praised the book as critiqued it (and even those who were critical generally acknowledged its overall power), many critics accused Wright of offering an unrealistic portrait of African Americans in Bigger, and a distorted view of the Communist Party in Jan Erlone and Boris Max. In a lengthy review, Ben Davis, Jr., a black Party leader, faulted Wright for making all the novel's black characters "beaten and desperate" and for ignoring "the progressive developments among the Negro people."

Wright failed to document the actual cultural strength and political acuity of the black masses. “The book could have, for example, made of Bigger’s mother a strong woman typical of Negro womanhood of today. And it seems only natural that through some of Bigger’s pals or in some other way the progressiveness and the constructive power of the Negro masses could have been brought forward more distinctly.” Similarly, Wright could have offered Communist characters who more accurately embodied the line of the Party. Boris Max’s speech, for example, actually expresses reactionary and reformist politics, and he does not use a realistic Communist legal strategy in his defense of Bigger: “Max should have argued for Bigger’s acquittal in the case, and should have helped stir the political pressure of the Negro and white masses to get that acquittal. From Max’s whole conduct the first business of the Communist Party . . . would have been to chuck him out of the case.” Finally, by making all the Communist characters white, when in fact African-Americans play prominent roles in the Party, Wright enabled “the misconception that the Communist Party is something ‘foreign’ to the Negro people” (4, 6). An anonymous African-American Communist reader, who adopted the pseudonym “Sister Carrie,” wrote to the newspaper in support of Davis’s review: “every single Negro character in ‘Native Son’ is beaten and backward. It seems Wright’s realism ran out about there, just where it was needed most” (“Readers” 7). James Baldwin’s famous postwar critique of *Native Son*—that it distorts black life, in the name of protest, as bestialized, monstrous, and deprived—was anticipated by black leftists in 1940.<sup>8</sup>

Ellison was impatient with such critiques, seeing them as emanating from a politically-correct bourgeois prescriptivism that was blind to Wright’s complex intentions. Critics were imposing a criteria—the need for an accurate documentation of black life and its political possibilities that would give the lie to racist distortions—that Ellison refused because he saw it as violating the autonomy of literature. As a “philosophical novel,” *Native Son* was endeavoring to produce knowledge, not reflect a pre-existing reality. Ellison complained to Wright that he and playwright Theodore Ward had spent six hours with Party leaders Abner Berry and Theodore Bassett in vain “trying to explain what fiction is about.” In the same letter, he described the “rot” that the novel has “brought up” among Harlem Communists. The opinions expressed in the bourgeois Baltimore *Afro-American*’s review—that the novel fuels white racism by depicting

Bigger's desire for Mary, by using racial slurs, by being sexually explicit, etc. (Johnson 13)—are, Ellison laments, more or less those aired in discussions of the novel by ostensible Marxists in Harlem (14 Apr. 1940). "They call themselves Marxists and fail to see the dialectics of ethical judgments involved [sic] in *Native Son* [sic]. They refuse to see the revolutionary significance of Bigger and while professing to be revolutionaries they have yet to rid themselves of their wornout [sic] Christian ethics" (22 Apr. 1940). In other words, by wanting to hold Wright to standards of representational responsibility to the extra-literary real and to conventional morality, these critics missed the productive theoretical work Wright was actually doing in the novel

The novel uses Bigger to theorize psychological responses to racism and modernity. Bigger's accidental murder of Mary becomes the catalyst for his recognition of his own humanity, construed by Wright as his ability to *act*—to transcend the delimitations of racist and economic marginalization, to distinguish himself as an individual agent, and to change the course of his environment. Bigger realizes that his invisibility to the white world actually enables his freedom because, at first, no one can suspect that Bigger would be capable of committing and concealing a murder. The Daltons, due to the contradiction between their philanthropic intentions and the enabling of that philanthropy by their economic exploitation of black housing, want to see Bigger in terms of their liberal preconceptions of a poor black youth from the South Side, so "they were blind to what did not fit." Therefore, "if he could see while others were blind, then he could get what he wanted" (102). The racial and economic contradictions of modernity enable Bigger to conceive of his agency. While Bigger doesn't grasp that agency in political terms, it is nonetheless nothing less than the capacity to act upon one's situation and transform it. The novel urges the left to understand and politically organize that capacity free of the bourgeois anxieties that paralyze Max at the end of the novel. Max implores Bigger to consider himself a passive victim of structural oppression, to see his crimes as determined and thus not, ultimately, *his* misdeeds. Bigger refuses: "I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em." Max responds with horror to Bigger's calming, personally-restorative sense of empowerment (392). The novel thus recasts Wright's earlier fascination with the ways African Americans spontaneously seized on Joe Louis as a revolutionary folk hero. It turns its

attention to the psychological and interior processes by which the repressed, “beaten and backward” black masses might attain political force. This attainment is what Ellison means by the “revolutionary significance of Bigger.” In bringing a discussion of psychology to Marxism, Ellison saw Wright as expanding Marxist theory beyond its preoccupation with economic and political questions, correcting its “almost total failure . . . to treat human personality” (14 Apr. 1940).

Certain critics could not grasp Wright’s project because they were worried about whether the book’s black characters were sufficiently noble, or whether Max was a realistic Communist lawyer. They, like the Daltons or like Max, wanted Bigger to “fit” their preconceptions of the “reality” of the black masses. Ellison’s dismay registers a potent critique of referential standards of political art: not only do they inhibit thematic and formal invention, but they prevent a novel from the kind of exploration that keeps Marxism alive and expanding.

Yet a problem remains: how could Wright have depicted Bigger so as to avoid the misreading that he was offering a strictly empirical representation of the urban black masses, while still making the complex situation of the urban black masses his theoretical subject matter? How can a writer craft and work over extra-literary content into a finished product that speaks to that content without being identical to it? In other words, what does the science of Marxist literature look like? Communist critic Mike Gold, in defending Wright’s novel, articulated an account of this science that closely resembles Ellison’s. Gold argued that fiction should not be judged by referential standards because, unlike journalism or photography, its formal aim is not “fidelity to the strict facts.” Rather, the writer is like the painter who “can invent, improvise, re-arrange reality” because literature and painting both aim to portray “the emotion behind the facts.” They do so by being selective, by “focusing almost to the point of distortion on the one emotion that is to be conveyed.” Gold argued that Wright wasn’t trying to document the status of blacks in the U.S. or the efforts of the Party—that’s for journalists. Rather, he was trying to focus on one problem or site of theoretical exploration: modern black psychology and its political ramifications. He was trying to understand how Bigger’s psyche works: “That is art: and it is also science and revolution” (7). The revolutionary and scientific insights of which literature is capable depend on non-realistic—even

“distorted,” perhaps surrealistic—techniques. Wright and Ellison admired Gold’s defenses of the novel (Gold wrote three articles in the *Daily Worker* doing so), and it’s more than likely that Ellison found Gold’s ideas suggestive.<sup>9</sup>

John Steinbeck’s 1942 novel *The Moon is Down* likely indicated further directions for Ellison. The uproar on the left over Steinbeck’s decisions in representing the Nazis led Communist critic Samuel Sillen to declare: “Not since *Native Son* has a book aroused so much controversy” (22). In *The Moon is Down*, unnamed fascistic invaders occupy a small village in an unspecified European country, but are eventually undone, psychologically and militarily, by the town’s spirited resistance. Published in early 1942, when the Communist movement was wholeheartedly behind the Allied war effort, the novel aroused controversy in the *New Masses* and *Daily Worker* by humanizing the invading officers—depicting their political doubts and psychological fears—and evacuating the referents of Nazism and anti-Nazi resistance from its fable-like plot. Pearl S. Buck found the humanization of the Nazis to be an effective tactic for demonstrating the weakness of Nazi Germany (23), while Joel Shaw insisted that distinguishing between “the system of Nazism and its active and leading proponents” would diminish the “bitter, intense hatred” needed to defeat those proponents in the war (21). But perhaps more unsettling was Steinbeck’s unusual decision to avoid any concrete references to Germany, Nazism, or anti-Nazi resistance in the text. While it was taken for granted by nearly all readers that the invaders were Germans and the town was located in Norway, the novel’s lack of concrete reference was a problem. Louis Budenz critiqued Steinbeck for not depicting the real historical conditions and contradictions that were fueling resistance in Nazi-occupied Europe and for attributing resistance to “the vague and almost mystical desire for ‘freedom.’” Further, Budenz faults Steinbeck for not showing how the specific contours of Nazi ideology would have imprinted themselves on the invaders; for not depicting the working-class nature of the resistance; and for failing to indicate the moral support given anti-Nazi resistance everywhere by the Soviet struggle against the Nazis. In short, Budenz finds that Steinbeck “errs against reality” (4).

However, Steinbeck’s novel indicates why he opted for this abstract level of representation. At one point, the town leaders plan to request weapons for the resistance from England. One mentions a possible obstacle: “I’ve heard it said in England there are

still men in power who do not dare to put weapons in the hands of common people.” To which the town’s mayor and leader replies: “If such people still govern England and America, the world is lost, anyway” (84). Steinbeck does not see World War II as a national struggle between Allied and Axis nations: he sees it as a large-scale battle between humanity and oppression, the people and the “invaders” of all nations that would curb the freedom of the masses. How individuals on both sides situate themselves in relation to this fundamental struggle is the novel’s central concern—and by humanizing the invaders, Steinbeck more than suggests that the principle of humanity must ultimately win out over power. The novel thus retains a more radical understanding of the war than the Communist Party offered—with its subordination of all other political concerns to strengthening the U.S. state’s military capacity—in that it refuses to uncritically back the Anglo-American cause. That understanding is formally encoded in the novel’s abstractions from the real.

One critic who took the abstract nature of the novel seriously was Stanley Edgar Hyman, a close friend of Ellison’s with whom he began corresponding in 1942. In the same month that Ellison wrote Hyman that he had “heard of [Hyman’s] work for quite some time” (qtd. in Rampersad 159), Hyman used the occasion of *The Moon is Down* controversy to do a lengthy reading of the symbolic and philosophical dimensions of Steinbeck’s oeuvre in the *Antioch Review*.<sup>10</sup> Hyman argued that the book was not intending to depict the Nazi invasion of Norway: critiques of the accuracy of such a depiction were thus unwarranted. The novel is instead an uneven symbolic attempt by Steinbeck to locate his personal literary practice within the social sphere, in the service of international collective struggle. Hence, Hyman insisted that the resemblances of the invaders to Germans or the country to a Scandinavian nation must not supplant the abstract identity of either. He then speculates in a footnote that “Steinbeck’s naming and absence of naming is very interesting,” noting that in *In Dubious Battle*, Steinbeck writes about the American Communist Party without ever calling them Communists (186). Hyman provides a clue to what an early reviewer of *Invisible Man* called a “mystery”: the substitution of the “Brotherhood” for the Communist Party (Prescott 19). We generally don’t think of Steinbeck as an influence on Ellison, but given the extent of the debates over *The Moon is Down*; the fact that it was defended in the *New Masses* by Samuel

Sillen, whose earlier defense of *Native Son* had earned Ellison's admiration<sup>11</sup>; and the insights of Hyman, such an influence certainly seems plausible.

The problem of reality, representation, and theoretical production occupied Ellison throughout the decade, animating even his non-literary essays. Just as invisible man wonders “[w]hat on earth was hiding behind the face of things” (493), Ellison came to see reality as something beneath or beyond the empirical. As such, experimentation in literary technique would be necessary to process the empirical and to wring epistemologically as well as politically constructive insights from it. Political practice is, for Ellison, about deciphering, unlocking, or totalizing—and not reflecting—reality. In a 1943 *Negro Quarterly* editorial, he insisted on the need for black political leaders to decode “the meaning of the myths and symbols which abound among the Negro masses”: “Much in Negro life remains a mystery; perhaps the zoot suit *conceals* profound political meaning; perhaps the symmetrical frenzy of the Lindy-hop *conceals* clues to great potential power” (“Editorial Comment” 301, emphasis added).

The following year, in “Richard Wright’s Blues,” Ellison echoed Mike Gold’s reading of *Native Son* in emphasizing the selective, artificial nature of art: “The function . . . of artistic selectivity is to eliminate from an art form all those elements of experience which contain no compelling significance. Life is as the sea, art a ship in which man conquers life’s crushing formlessness, reducing it to a course, a series of swells, tides and wind currents inscribed on a chart.” In this essay in which he famously theorizes the blues, art is a blues practice of discipline, technique, and transformative epistemological labor. Ellison also used this essay to diagnose the limitations of empirical observation. He argues that the “sociology of sensibility” with which whites understand black life takes two forms: blacks are seen either in terms of pastoral expressive romanticization or primitive, socially and sexually unrepressed exoticism. Ellison doesn’t deny the empirical accuracy of either—one can observe both tendencies present in black life. But they are epistemologically inadequate because they are merely empirical: while there exist culturally successful black artists like Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson, they are exceptions, and touting them as representative obscures the ways a writer like Wright, growing up in the Jim Crow South, must struggle to develop an artistic individuality. The second attitude fails to understand the sociohistorical determination of what looks like a

natural freedom from repression: Jim Crow has forced blacks' responses to changing social conditions into physical forms like "nervous tension, anxiety and hysteria" that are easily mistaken for an inborn primitive passion. One should note the Marxist, totalizing nature of Ellison's epistemology: truth is not a property of the "face of things." Instead, it lies in the relation between an object—in this case, black life—and its sociohistorical totality. "Negro life does not exist in a vacuum," he argues, "but in the seething vortex of those tensions generated by the most highly industrialized of Western nations. The welfare of the most humble black Mississippi sharecropper is affected less by the flow of the seasons and the rhythm of natural events than by the fluctuations of the stock market" (*Collected Essays* 133, 136-38).

Similarly, in his 1944 review of Gunnar Mrydal's sociological study of American race relations, *An American Dilemma*, Ellison critiques sociology and American Communism from the perspective of Marxism. Robert E. Park and the Chicago School of Sociology are called to task for their "timidity," for being "victims of the imposed limitations of bourgeois science." The distinction being drawn is not between science and culture (between reductive statistics and cultural richness), but between science and what Ellison specifies as *bourgeois* science, or sociology. How is sociology limited and timid? Ellison's answer is by way of a comparison of Park to William Graham Sumner: "Sumner believed it 'the greatest folly of which man is capable to sit down with a slate and pencil and plan out a new world,' a point of view containing little hope for the underdog. But for all his good works, some of Park's assumptions were little better." Ellison then quotes Park's claim that African Americans have "always been interested in expression rather than in action. . . . The Negro is, by natural disposition . . . an artist, loving life for its own sake. . . . He is, so to speak, the lady among the races" (*Collected Essays* 332). Sociology's empiricism reifies unjust social orders by enshrining their ramifications as untotalized facts: if African-Americans are naturally "ladylike"—artistic, passive, happy minstrel-show stereotypes—then both the structural determinations that make this disposition appear natural (for example, the violent enforcing of African-American passivity), as well as any possibilities for structural transformation, are dismissed from sociology's purview. Hence, sociology is a bourgeois science because it isn't scientific in Althusser or Ellison's use of the term: it serves the

end not of producing new transformative knowledge, but of naturalizing given power arrangements.

The Communist movement in the 1930s, Ellison continues, gave unprecedented attention to the situation of African Americans and was often effective in the battle against racism. But he faults the Communists for not “defining the nature of the [race] problem beyond its economic and political aspects.” The Communists didn’t consider the place of the irrational, the psychological, or human interiority, all of the dimensions plumbed by Wright in *Native Son*. This was not a failure in taking a Marxist approach to the problem, but in taking an inadequately Marxist approach. The left has failed to understand race in America “with that cultural sophistication and social insight springing from Marxist theory, which, backed by passion and courage, has allowed the Left in other countries to deal more creatively with reality than the Right, and to overcome the Right’s advantages of institutionalized power and erudition” (336). The Communist left has taken a too empirical and sociological approach to race, and by doing so has betrayed both the sophistication and commitment to experiment in technique and political action that Ellison here associates with Marxist science. When the face of things becomes conflated with the reality of things, Ellison’s essay argues, political change is stymied and ideology—whose function is to shore up the inevitability of the apparent—displaces science. A properly Marxist approach to the problem of race must be creative in its procedures, totalizing in its perspective, and transformative in its ends. It will require a “deeper science than Myrdal’s” or orthodox Communism’s to not simply describe the world, but to change it.

Ellison provides an example of a properly scientific practitioner in his 1948 “Harlem is Nowhere” essay, which describes the Lafargue Psychiatric Clinic, set up by Frederick Wertham to treat psychological disorders among Harlem’s poor. Ellison calls the clinic, located in the basement of St. Philip’s Church, “an underground extension of democracy.” Ellison was no longer thinking of his argument in radical left vocabulary, but he praises the clinic for essentially taking a scientific Marxist approach in “recognizing the total implication of Negro life in the United States.” In treating an individual subject, Ellison writes, the staff approaches the subject’s psyche as overdetermined by three levels of the subject’s existence: as “member of a racial and

cultural minority, as an American citizen caught in certain political and economic relationships, and as a modern man living in the revolutionary world” (320). The clinic produces knowledge about the complex, dynamic relations among black identity, American structures in dominance, and modernization. It is Harlem itself that prompts the need for this science, and Harlem for Ellison is less a place than a historical condition: “Overcrowded and exploited politically and economically, Harlem is the scene and symbol of the Negro’s perpetual alienation in the land of his birth.” By analyzing the psyche of Harlem’s blacks, the Clinic studies the broader contradiction between “urban slum conditions and folk sensibilities” and the “vast process of change” that has industrialized the African-American folk. The rapidity of modernization makes Harlem “a world so fluid and shifting that often within the mind the real and the unreal merge, and the marvelous beckons from behind the same sordid reality that denies its existence.” Hence, methodologies of empiricism—sociology, or documentary literary realism—are clearly inadequate. Ellison ends the essay by describing the resistance Wertham faced in establishing the Clinic from politicians who “accused him of harboring political rather than humanitarian motives.” For all that, “[h]ere, in the basement, a frustrated science goes to find its true object: the confused of mind who seek reality. Both find the source of their frustrations in the sickness of the social order.” Thus, only revolutionary social change can ultimately “cure” the Clinic’s patients. “Knowing this, Dr. Wertham and his interracial staff seek a modest achievement: to give each bewildered patient an insight into the relation between his problems and his environment,” knowledge which will, like the blues, enable “the will to endure in a hostile world” (*Collected Essays* 320-22; 327). The Clinic models a scientific blues practice of Marxism—a practice that invisible man, from his own subterranean location, will attempt to put to work.

So even as Ellison departs from the Communist movement and even as the term “Marxist” becomes scarcer and scarcer in his vocabulary, he is invested in an epistemological and literary project that fits the definition of scientific Marxism as laid out by Althusser: it seeks knowledge of reality behind the empirical, and to do so must not only innovate its technical or figurative means, but question and keep open its conclusions and insights. It must *produce* truth, and thereby serve as a guide for the political production of revolutionary change. Ellison rarely describes this practice as

Marxist, but he translates the Marxist emphasis on production into terms of scientificity—the productive “deeper science” of the Lafargue Clinic—and aesthetics—the transformative labor of working-through experience to transcend from its immediacy to a plane of higher understanding and consciousness, a labor he calls the blues.

### **“Negro Underworld Characters”: The Lumpenproletarian Blues**

Langston Hughes’s *The Big Sea* is generally unacknowledged as an influence on *Invisible Man*. Ellison’s 1940 claim that it had no meaning beyond recording the details of Hughes’s life was singularly unfair, for there are many general theses that Hughes marshals his life to theorize. One is the rejection of literature and published knowledge as too abstract and removed from the visceral reality of the black masses. In the famous opening scene, Hughes—employed as a seaman on a merchant ship—throws all his books overboard before going below deck to converse with George and Ramon, two vibrant black workers. This claim reasserts itself throughout: reality is empirical, is “to be touched and seen, not merely read about in a book” (10). Books, precisely because they incorporate an aesthetic distance from the real, are unreal for Hughes: “if people suffered [in books], they suffered in beautiful language, not in monosyllables, as we did in Kansas” (16). Ellison would not have been sympathetic to this empiricist argument, but Hughes offers others claim that likely demanded his attention. *The Big Sea* conflates the labor of the poet with that of the blues singer and that of the worker—indeed, Hughes strives to make all three identical. “Poetry is Practical,” declares one of his chapter headings, in which he describes “The Weary Blues” as “a poem about a working man who sang the blues all night and then went to bed and slept like a rock” (215). Hughes quite consciously presents himself throughout as at once worker, blues singer, and poet, and all three positions are defined by work, practice, and productive expression. *The Big Sea* anticipates Ellison’s own practical and productive notions of the blues. Ellison seems to have recombined Hughes’s aesthetic theory, preserving an account of the productivity of art but positioning non-empirical insight as the object of that production: he revalues Hughes’s critique of books by positioning their abstractions as a surer means of knowledge about a reality that lies behind and beyond what is “touched and seen.”

Yet for all the celebration of black workers, Hughes's text demonstrates the theoretical and figurative logic by which the lumpenproletariat anchors and enables blues production. His privileged elements of the black masses, at one point, are urban denizens who must survive by taking their clothes to the pawnshop. Hughes's second book, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (the pawnshop is known in black lingo, Hughes explains, as "the Jew's") was aesthetically successful in part, he argues, because it was about the real struggles and cultural resilience of the black poor, "workers, roustabouts, and singers, and job hunters . . . people up today and down tomorrow, working this week and fired the next, beaten and baffled, but determined not to be wholly beaten" (264). The people described here are not just proletarians. Rather, Hughes gives an honorific account of lumpen figures—those who are structurally unstable, lack a secure class position, and must resort to measures like pawning to survive. Here the transience and desperation of the lumpenproletariat are linked to the enablement of literary craft, and the very figurative nexus of their marginality and possibility—the linen of fine clothes and the blank page of the poet—is mobilized by Hughes to explicate the vitality of his verse.

After *Slick*, Ellison likewise comes to see the lumpen-folk as a symbol for the orientation and practice of science, whether in politics or literature. In his 1941 "Recent Negro Fiction" essay, Ellison argues that the epistemological and aesthetic development of black fiction impacts American politics as a whole, since "great . . . social and political forces pivot on the Negro group." For instance, capital's use of "Negro underworld characters" to disrupt a recent strike at the Ford River Rouge plant demonstrates the need for literature to penetrate reality and guide African Americans through it. If the black lumpenproletariat is not to be "used by an American fascism," theory must grasp "the great American social and political forces that pivot on the Negro group," and literature's task must be to help blacks "possess the conscious meaning of their lives" (25-6). Seven years later, Ellison describes the Lafargue Clinic's object of study as the urban lumpenproletarian, the transplanted black figure who lacks "institutions to give him direction" and clear knowledge of his plight. These figures have "no stable, recognized place" in society: "One 'is' literally, but one is nowhere; one wanders dazed in a ghetto maze, a 'displaced person' of American democracy" (325). Ellison doesn't share Hughes's straightforward admiration of these types. The black lumpen, for Ellison, are

not a heroic social set or vanguard of revolutionary militancy. They are *symptoms* of the complexity of modern social arrangements and thus embody the need to craft a science capable of grasping and transforming those arrangements.

Hence, the scene from *The Big Sea* that links directly to *Invisible Man* is the episode when Hughes writes an article condemning the bourgeois elitism of the all-black Lincoln University and its white philanthropist backers. For his article, he is rebuked by the founder of a “great institution” for blacks in the Midwest. Anticipating the words of Bledsoe to invisible man, the educator lectures Hughes on the need to win things from whites “by flattery, cajolery, good-natured begging, lying, and general Uncle Toming.” After reflection, Hughes rejects the “great buildings” and institutions of the black middle class, opting instead for “Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, John Brown, Fred Douglass—folks who left no buildings behind them—only a wind of words fanning the bright flame of the spirit down the dark lanes of time” (309-10).<sup>12</sup> Marxism must not build buildings—that is, it must not establish permanent institutions and integrate itself into the social fabric of the present, as both *Invisible Man*’s College and Brotherhood aim to do. Rather, it should imitate the revolutionary expression of the black radical tradition and the transient creativity of the lumpenproletariat. It should embody not Tom’s surety, but Huck’s fluidity. Marxist science is as inventive, mobile, and consciously disciplined as a traveling blues singer, a revolutionary leader, or the act of writing itself.

### **Paper, Rags, Utopia: The Political and Conceptual Dynamics of *Invisible Man***

Echoing earlier criticisms of *Native Son* and *The Moon is Down*, black leftists in 1952 condemned what they saw as the referential inaccuracy of *Invisible Man*. They assumed, as did nearly all reviewers, that the novel was at least partially intended as an exposé and that the Brotherhood was, in Communist Lloyd Brown’s words, a “euphemism for the Communist Party.” Brown indicts the novel as an “anti-Communist lie” imitating the formal and political “formula for literary success” in Cold War America (31, 32). John Oliver Killens accused Ellison of producing a “publisher’s dream” in combining “violence . . . sadism and . . . redbaiting.” Calling the novel a “vicious distortion of Negro life,” Killens argued that it represents African Americans as “a hopeless bunch of dehumanized beings.” He echoes the *Baltimore Afro-American*’s 1940

verdict on *Native Son*—“We don’t need books like ‘Native Son’” (Johnson 13)—in concluding: “The Negro people need Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* like we need a hole in the head or a stab in the back” (7). Seeking mainstream success, these reviewers argue, the novel misrepresents black life while partaking of stock anticommunism and Cold War rhetoric. Furthermore, while Mike Gold earlier defended *Native Son* from critiques of its referential accuracy, reviewers of all political persuasions generally assumed the referential intent of Ellison’s novel. Orville Prescott saw the Brotherhood as an “exact” depiction of the Communist Party (19), and many reviews simply refer to the Brotherhood as the Party in their readings (Barrett 23-5; Chase 35-7). Irving Howe questioned the accuracy of the Brotherhood as a picture of the Party—“Ellison makes his Stalinists so stupid and vicious that one cannot understand how they could have attracted him” (21)—but not the assumption that the Brotherhood is to be read, really, as the Party.

Critical readings of *Invisible Man* from the left haven’t moved far past these protocols. In *Wrestling with the Left*, Barbara Foley finds that the novel that began life in the mid-1940s as a realist, politically-engaged proletarian text was gradually revised by Ellison into a novel of Cold War reaction, patriotism, and existential individualism that distorts the humane political visions of the Communist left. This “anticommunist-ization” proceeded on two fronts, she argues. First, Ellison reworked his initially more positive depiction of the Brotherhood into one of an exploitative, authoritarian body. Secondly, he removed all concrete historical references to “depoliticize the novel’s historical context and facilitate its critique of the left” (8). She writes that Ellison gradually removed explicit references to proletarian militancy and effective leftist praxis in a complex labor of excision, distortion, and fabrication. For instance, even though Harlem Communists frequently organized politically-constructive funerals for members, the Brotherhood’s resistance to Tod Clifton’s funeral in the published version allows Ellison to highlight their political self-interest (308-310). The character of Ras the Exhorter references Randolph Wilson, an actual 1940s Harlem nationalist, anti-Semite, and Hitler supporter nicknamed “Ras the Killer.” Ellison leaves out his fascist views from the novel, Foley charges, in order to both validate Ras’s critique of the Brotherhood as exploiting African Americans and to allow Ras to catalyze invisible man’s recognition of his essential American identity (299-302). Similarly, Rinehart recalls Lawrence Dennis, an African-

American (who passed as white) fascist theorist from the 1930s. By not giving Rinehart similar fascist ideas, Ellison, Foley argues, “wished to detach his confidence man’s exploitative mode of operation from its specific political contents” and thus dehistoricize and validate the chaos and fluidity embodied by Rinehart (305-8). Finally, Foley argues that the novel’s climactic riot is a falsification of the actual Harlem Riot of 1943. By not representing the historical causes of the riot—wartime segregation, police oppression, economic hardship—Ellison portrays it as a cynically-orchestrated Brotherhood plot to manipulate its Harlem constituency. “History becomes mirage,” Foley charges, “while anti-communist fantasy becomes reality” (320).<sup>13</sup> Throughout the 1952 text, Foley argues, “[r]eference bows down to rhetoric” (324), meaning that the historical record of the left and its achievements is occluded and replaced by a high modernist, symbolic text that abjures realism and thus satisfies the aesthetic and political criteria of Cold War liberal ideology.

Like other critics, Foley doesn’t question the identification of the Brotherhood with the Communist Party, the College with Tuskegee, or the Founder with Booker T. Washington. “We wink and nod when Ellison identifies his leftists as the ‘Brotherhood,’ just as we previously winked and nodded at his dissociation of the Founder from Booker T. Washington and of the campus . . . from Tuskegee” (238). In other words, we the readers know who Ellison’s really writing about. Left uninterrogated by Foley is the distance between the novel and reality, as well as the sociopolitical identity of its non-referential, anti-realist form. Oddly enough, what Foley considers a paradigmatic novel of anticommunist Cold War liberalism is one in which terms like “Marx,” “Communism,” or “Communist” never actually appear. And while critics and readers often confidently assume that the novel avows patriotism and democracy, little of that rhetoric is present, either. The protagonist faults Jack, Emerson, Bledsoe, and Norton for their “refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine.” In the epilogue, he refers to “the principle on which the country was built” and claims that “America is woven of many strands. . . . It’s ‘winner take nothing’ that is the great truth of our country or of any country” (559, 574, 577). On their own, these statements don’t quite add up to a straightforward Cold War Americanism.

Ellison's novel is usefully compared with Algren's *The Man with the Golden Arm*: both focus on individual experience and perception, both are devoid of any direct references to the left, and both are symbolic avant-garde prose experiments. Earlier, we saw how Algren harnessed literary form—in its autonomy from reality—to craft a complex figurative analysis of social structure and political resistance in postwar America. Here, I want to treat *Invisible Man* similarly, to reconstruct its political and theoretical project by crediting its non-correspondence to the historical real. By bracketing the question of reference—something few leftist readers of *Invisible Man* have ever been willing to do—I read the novel instead as an exercise in what Ellison thought of as the blues—the blues *not* as an alternative to radicalism, but as the properly generative and creative practice of an American Marxism.

Following the injunction Langston Hughes proposed for both revolutionary politics and writing in *The Big Sea*—don't build buildings!—*Invisible Man* is not a *monument* of its historical moment. Monuments are suspect in the novel. The statue of the Founder on the College campus holding a veil over the kneeling slave, invisible man notes, seems to suggest epistemological obstruction rather than illumination: he is “unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place” (36). As a realistic embodiment and representation—a textual monument—of a historical moment, a novel can illuminate the social and material complexities of that moment. But it could equally blind the reader to general or abstract lessons—the political or theoretical truths behind the façade of things—that transcend that moment.<sup>14</sup> *Invisible Man*'s surrealistic style and avoidance of historical reference facilitate its productive conceptual mobility, a productive mobility granted by distance from the facts and from the burden of representational accuracy. In this way, Ellison's theoretical work in the 1940s, in which he devalued documentary realism in favor of inventive technique, and the non-referential projects of works like *Native Son* and *The Moon is Down*, are recapitulated in *Invisible Man*. Ellison denied he was writing about historically-real institutions and figures: “Real characters are just a limitation,” he once claimed. “It's like turning your own life into fiction: you have to be hindered by chronology and fact” (*Collected Essays* 222). Rather than a building—a material component belonging to its historical moment—*Invisible Man*'s abstractions enable it to approximate what Hughes described as “a wind of words

fanning the bright flame of the spirit down the dark lanes of time”: a *general* commentary and radical analysis.

John Callahan has sought to take Ellison seriously on this score, arguing that *Invisible Man*'s non-referentiality grants it an epistemological privilege and allows it to realize a moral purpose, both of which history as mere chronology cannot encompass. Hence, he notes that invisible man often avoids “even implicit reference to matters of history” in the twenty years (“presumably from *about* 1930 to *about* 1950”) in which his story unfolds. Ellison avoids historical reference in order to “open up associations and extend significance.” In the scene in which invisible man halts the eviction of the Provos, an elderly black couple in Harlem, Ellison makes no reference to the Great Depression because, Callahan suggests, Ellison was “unwilling to restrict the Provos’ dispossessed condition to one point in time, perhaps because of the danger that, if he did so, what has been archetypal in black experience might be laid simply at the door of hard times.” Ellison introduced the Brotherhood so as “not to limit his portrayal to the Communist Party” but to include also “the relation between American blacks and the Democratic and Republican parties” as well. The ending riot should not be read as just an inaccurate account of the 1943 Harlem riot, but “an archetypal projection, in fiction, of an American form of violence by no means limited to any particular time and place.” Ras is not Marcus Garvey or Randolph Wilson, but “black nationalism as a powerful archetype in American experience.” The Founder is meant to invoke not just Booker T. Washington, but multiple other founders, including the Founding Fathers. Callahan asks us to consider what Ellison was doing in making only “implicit reference” to history, rather than follow critics who “perversely persist” in locating “one-to-one correspondences” (134-5). How was Ellison—like the Marxist scientist or blues singer—transforming the facts of experience and history into something else?

In a different manner, Philip Brian Harper has also credited the novel's abstractions by focusing on the namelessness of the protagonist. The subjective identity invisible man finally realizes, Harper argues, is one that preserves rather than cancels the fragmented, de-centered state of subjectivity that, as an African American, he endures. The identity he finds is not that of a molar subjectivity that heals fragmentation and can be named, but one that has political value as a dynamic, open-ended synthesis of the

individual black subject and the black collectivity. Considering the ways blackness is controlled and policed by imposing definition upon it, invisible man's post-essentialist self is one that preserves the oppositional capacity of marginal and minority identities (116-44). I am influenced both by Callahan's focus on the novel's motivated non-referentiality and by Harper's identification of a proto-postmodern political aesthetic in the novel that favors fragmentation and multiplicity over definition and essence. I read for the productive work of the novel which, like Callahan, I see as dependent on literature's formal distance from the factual and, like Harper, as linking anti-originary fluidity and non-identity to political resistance.

As we've seen from his 1940s writings, Ellison insisted that the productive epistemological work of novels depended on their formal or "technical" appropriation and transformation of reality. In the postwar period, he'd continue this insistence. In 1965, he defined the novel as "bringing to the surface those values, patterns of conduct and dilemmas, psychological and technological, which abide within the human predicament." Earlier, he argued that "the novel seeks to take the surface 'facts' of experience and arrange them in such ways that for a magic moment reality comes into sharp and significant focus." In his National Book Award acceptance speech for *Invisible Man*, he positioned "the passionate will to dominate reality" as the "true source" of experimental literature, which must "challenge the apparent forms of reality—that is, the fixed manners and values of the few—and to struggle with it until it . . . surrenders its insight, its truth." Truth is not fact or chronology but something more general: the abiding (what Callahan calls "archetypal") patterns of social, material, and psychological operation in the United States. *Invisible Man* analyzes those patterns *at the level of their generality* and produces knowledge of them and of the chances they offer for utopian social change, for undoing "the fixed manners and values of the few" (*Collected Essays* 761, 702, 154). Grasping the novel's deployment of the dialectical relations between the dismal reality and utopian potential of America—what the protagonist distinguishes as the "men" and the "principle" (574)—is vital to understanding how *Invisible Man* offers a political vision much more radical than liberalism, and how its very practical operation symbolizes social change by transforming reality within the bounds of form.

The object of *Invisible Man*, then, is the general relation among, one: the fluid ontology of American society; two: organized institutional and political paradigms; and three: the relative ability of both to inculcate social transformation. The novel thus reflects the Marxist problematic of Ellison's Depression-era work in triangulating the social, the institutional, and the political. It undertakes that triangulation by motivating the general trope of the lumpenproletariat—the dialectic of rags and paper. However, Ellison here reverses the standard valuation of that dialectic. Raggedness is the signifier of possibility in the novel's tropic system: it connotes not material delimitation but an unformed condition of fluidity or "chaos" that typifies American society and that contains the possibility for the emergence of the new. Paper suggests the codifying of that ragged potentiality into defined plans and paradigms, a delimitation of chaos that is both necessary to mass political action *and* (here's the complication) that tends to render political bodies conservative and self-interested. If political programs have to be articulated and organized out of the unformed fluidity of American social life, that organization nevertheless threatens to become a monument or building of its own once it's set down in ink. Thus institutions organized for transformative political purposes betray the intent of their founding and the needs of their constituents. That dilemma—rendered as the dialectical indeterminacy distinguishing the rag from the paper—is what Ellison, in a blues Marxist literary practice, attempts to work through by transforming historical reference into symbolic form.

*Invisible Man* must avoid becoming a similarly institutionalized document, a paper monument of its day and age or of aesthetic greatness instead of a generative, transhistorical theoretical analysis. This is the problem invisible man confronts at the outset of the novel. He has located himself outside of time and space, outside of historical reality, in a basement *beneath* a building "rented strictly to whites" that was "shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century." He is quite clear that this basement is not on any real map, not in Harlem "but in a border area." He gets outside the spatial and temporal coordinates of American modernity—a modernity whose power arrangements here take the form of geographical segregation and compartmentalization—in order to use electric light to "[confirm] my reality, [give] birth to my form." Light illuminates the "formless mass" of his experience as identity and meaning: his theft of electric power is thus a

figure for the blues practice of writing, a laboring upon given events that wrings from them their significance. This choice of figure reminds us how frequently Ellison associates that practice with scientificity and technical experiment. Invisible man is a “thinker-tinker” “in the great American tradition of tinkers”—theory is the object of his practice. His recollection and confession—and Ellison’s act of writing—will not reflect or document reality, but manipulate it, *form* it, until it yields a general theoretical gain that transcends time and place in its instructive significance. Yet he is also aware that his writing might reify form over formlessness, producing a text that is an end in itself. His activity in his hole, he thus insists, is only a hibernation, “a covert preparation for a more overt action.” He wants to undermine the foundation of the present, not monumentalize it.

The novel demonstrates this lesson and preserves without synthesizing the dialectic of rags and paper, form and chaos: “the mind that has conceived a plan of action must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived.” Invisible man’s story, we remember, closes with a hypothetical question (“Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”) and opens with the same question: “I am an orator, a rabble rouser—Am? I was, and perhaps shall be again. Who knows?” Such uncertainty—a refusal to pin down definite meaning—pervades all registers of the text: invisible man hardly ever reaches a definite conclusion about anything, and historical references are purposely vague and imprecise. This uncertainty is not a rhetorical adoption of Cold War liberal ambiguity. It’s a formal means of protecting the ragged generativity of the novel’s conceptual and political investigations against enshrining the present in paper form (6, 5, 7, 13, 580, 581, 14).

For an example of the stakes of this rags/paper dialectic, consider Dr. Bledsoe, the president of the College. Bledsoe’s actions toward invisible man are motivated by his need to conserve his institutional authority even at the expense of individuals like the protagonist, whom the institution nominally serves. The ideals of the Founder and the College’s ostensible uplift program aside, the College is in fact complicit with white hegemony in keeping blacks down. Bledsoe himself incarnates this passage from progressive ideal to institutional conservatism. According to the “legend” of Bledsoe, he arrived at the College much like Ellison arrived at Tuskegee in 1933 as a “barefoot boy who in his fervor for education had trudged with his bundle of ragged clothing across two

states.” Bledsoe began his career among the ragged lumpenproletariat. We saw, in Ellison’s 1930s work, the fluid sociopolitical possibility that Ellison’s lumpen-folk figures inhabit and embody. However, Bledsoe’s rags have become the papers through which his institutional power functions: the Bellerophonic letters he sends invisible man to New York with, as well as the scholarship that has enabled invisible man to attend the College in the first place. These papers, of course, are various instances of one general paper: the “engraved document” of invisible man’s early dream that reads “To Whom It May Concern . . . Keep This Nigger-Boy Running.” The scholarship and Bledsoe’s letters both go into invisible man’s briefcase as “important papers that will help shape the destiny of your people,” but they shape it according to the needs of the College and the racist American state whose interests the College represents. This important point is often overlooked in readings of the novel as an affirmation of Americanism. Invisible man is sent to the College by the white businessmen (“the town’s big shots”) of the opening smoker scene as a reward for his speech touting the virtues of racial accommodation and accession to Jim Crow. Bledsoe is not just an “EDUCATOR,” as his press photos are captioned. “He was a leader, a ‘statesman’ who carried our problems to those above us, even unto the White House.” He is “of more importance in the world than most Southern white men” and is “[i]nfluential with wealthy men all over the country” and “consulted in matters concerning the race.” The College buildings, invisible man will later discover, are whitewashed with Liberty paint and thus help “KEEP AMERICA PURE” (115-6, 33, 32, 17, 116, 101, 201).

When a frustrated invisible man threatens to “fight” Bledsoe over his expulsion, Bledsoe warns him: “When you buck against me, you’re bucking against power, rich white folk’s power, the nation’s power—which means government power!” Bledsoe defines government power in terms of racial and class rule. Bledsoe ensures the operation of that rule among African Americans, as Homer Barbee reveals in his speech at chapel that same night. Barbee describes one night when the Founder, delivering an address before a “jam-packed auditorium” was interrupted by an elderly black man who cried: “Tells us what is to be done, sir! For God’s sake, tell us! Tell us in the name of my son they snatched from me last week!” The Founder, perhaps aware that racial uplift cannot solve the fundamental political problem of racial oppression precisely because it is

complicit with racial oppression, faints. His questioner has identified the limits of his program: he has identified the gap between the Founder's progressive ideal and the shortcomings of his actual program.

Bledsoe silences the challenge, however: Barbee recalls how Bledsoe's voice "ring[s] out with whip-like authority," leading the crowd in a familiar litany of hope, faith, and struggle while "we stretch the Founder upon a bench to rest." Like a slavemaster, Bledsoe has used his oratory to quell the critique. When the Founder revives, he assures the crowd he was merely weary with traveling and departs without answering the fundamental "what is to be done?" question. Barbee goes on to amplify his praise of Bledsoe, he "who with his singing of the old familiar melodies soothed the doubts and fears of the multitude; he who had rallied the ignorant, the fearful and suspicious, those still wrapped in the rags of slavery." Ironically, those rags of slavery are the sign of the black multitude's lived experience of racial oppression. When they call out to the Founder for aid in resisting that oppression, they not only receive no answer but have to be subdued. The scene Barbee describes echoes the earlier scene at the Golden Day, when the veterans who—like the Founder's challenger—have literally been driven mad by the distance between the "golden day" ideal of Americanism and the reality of racism, beat their attendant and lay his prostrate body on the bar. The episode at the Golden Day allegorizes the claim we saw in Ellison's Depression writings: that the chaos and contradictions of American society can give rise to potentially revolutionary energies that institutional authority struggles to control. Bledsoe derives his power and his backing by the state and the ruling class from his famed ability to exert such control over the political instincts of the black masses—to keep the raggedness economic and racial forms of slavery produce from yielding transformative possibilities (141-2, 125-6, 129, 82-85). The novel must avoid the example of Bledsoe, who appeases the status quo by giving institutional, defined form to blackness and thus silencing the revolutionary potentials thrown up by the complexities and contradictions—the ragged indeterminacy—of black experience in the U.S. The novel's non-referentiality enables it to think those potentials without confining them in static, essential representations or (the same problem) documenting them as finished facts of a past era.

The alignment of political possibility with those still wrapped in the rags of slavery recalls Ellison's earlier Depression focus on "lumpen-folk" figures, those types who synthesize an essential human agency with the social mobility of the lumpenproletariat. In the Southern scenes of *Invisible Man*, the folk possess a political drive that the College seeks to discipline. Invisible man himself, who receives this lesson in institutional discipline, is aligned with the folk in that he hails from a town called "Greenwood" (29). Jim Trueblood is an object of disgust for the College because he won't take this lesson. "How all of us at the college hated the black-belt people, the 'peasants,' during those days!" invisible man recalls of his attitude toward Trueblood, the sharecropper who has committed incest with his daughter yet refuses to view his actions as a disgrace to the race. "We were trying to lift them up and they, like Trueblood, did everything it seemed to pull us down." Trueblood is at the center of a struggle between local whites and the College to define black identity: while Bledsoe endeavors to get rid of him, whites see him as an object of sociological interest ("white folks . . . from the big school way cross the State . . . [a]sked me lots 'bout what I thought 'bout things, and 'bout my folks and the kids, and wrote it all down in a book") and exploit his experiences to reinforce notions of black degeneracy. Yet as Houston Baker has argued, Trueblood in turn exploits his situation to get material benefits from whites—he sings the blues to express his personal pain, yet quite consciously retails his story for profit (Baker 177-92). He is a "trueblooded" folk figure who anticipates the urban lumpenproletarian Rinehart by finding possibility in his invisibility and exploiting the contradictions of the American racial order for his own benefit. By describing him as a "black-belt" figure, invisible man echoes the Communist Party's 1930s "black belt" thesis, which imbued the black folk with political agency (46-68).

Where does that agency reside with Trueblood? In a brief aside to his story of incest, Trueblood identifies himself as a lumpen-folk figure. He recollects a time when he "left the farm and went to live in Mobile and 'bout a gal I had me then." They lived in a house beside the river, and he'd listen to the music from passing boats: "us, me and the gal, would lay there feeling like we was rich folks and them boys on the boats would be playin' sweet as good peach brandy wine." "I likes to recall them Mobile days," he concludes, before returning to the story of how he impregnated his daughter (55-6). This

lyrical aside emphasizes freedom from work and social place and locates—like Algren does in *Somebody in Boots* and *The Man with the Golden Arm*—utopian collectivity in an idyllic domestic relationship. That relationship is not integrated within stable social structures but exists in a “mobile” state by the flowing river. In a mode mediated by subjective memory, Trueblood’s story of his “Mobile days” narrates a state of free lumpenproletarian marginality that, because it is only an aside to his main narrative, remains outside institutional co-option. It suggests an unformed, ragged alternative to both sociological/racist and racial-uplift formal paradigms—an alternative that will reappear later in the form of Rinehart, the zoot-suit-clad sharpies on the subway, and the rioters who burn their own tenement building. The Southern section of the novel initiates Ellison’s theoretical program by interrogating the interplay among politics, social form, and institutional control in America.

The New York sections of the novel theorize the failure of America and forms of American liberalism to answer the “what is to be done?” question on behalf of blacks. Emerson, the industrialist whose office is a “museum” of imperialism stocked with animal and artistic specimens from around the globe, is complicit with Bledsoe in keeping the ideal of American freedom out of reach: “I beg of you, sir,” Bledsoe’s letter to Emerson pleads, “to help him continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveler.” Emerson—and the optimistic celebration of American character his namesake invokes—can offer blacks the promise, but not the reality, of freedom. Emerson’s son, of course, recalls Walt Whitman (“have you ever been to the club Calamus?” he asks invisible man) in embodying a more egalitarian vision of democracy, but it’s also one that fails invisible man. His intentions are good—and he plays the decisive role in revealing the true nature of Bledsoe and the College to invisible man—but not only is he too afraid of his father to openly resist him, his claim to solidarity with invisible man is based on a homosexual affection Ellison finds suspect on multiple fronts: it ignores invisible man’s racial particularity; it offers inclusion not in a political collectivity, but in a bohemian set; and it suggests a racial exploitation of its own—“Perhaps you’d like to be my valet?” he offers. Otherwise, all Emerson’s son can offer is labor: by referring invisible man to the job at Liberty Paints, he encourages proletarianization of a non-revolutionary, patriotic sort

(180-92). And as Lucius Brockway and the labor union at the paint factory respectively illustrate, such proletarianization entails either false identification with the white ruling class and a proprietary pride in laboring for that class, or a submerging of African-American needs and particularities in working-class universalism (207-30). Even the most progressive inheritances of Americanism—Emersonian democracy, Whitmanesque egalitarianism, working-class identity—cannot escape complicity with racial servitude and imperialism.

The eviction of the Provos contains the novel's clearest critique of the American state. John Callahan is quite right to suggest that the novel does not assign the blame for the Provos' hard times to the Depression. Instead, Ellison attributes it to the inability of the state to protect and include African Americans. Among the elderly black couple's possessions are "three lapsed life insurance policies," a newspaper portrait of Marcus Garvey with the news of his deportation, and the freedom papers of the husband and former slave, Primus Provo. These papers, representing the state and the law, disenfranchise African Americans. Their presence among the rest of the Provos' possessions indicates the betrayal of what they ideally promise: life, black pride, freedom. The speech invisible man gives to inspire the protest emphasizes this theme by subverting the College's and the state's expectation of African Americans as "law-abiding" people. He reiterates the challenge posed by the ragged ex-slave to the Founder—"What is to be done?"—and answers it ironically, urging the crowd to do the "law-abiding" thing and "clear the street of the debris. Put it out of sight! Hide it, hide their shame! Hide *our* shame!" By taking the same words Bledsoe might apply to a "shame" like Trueblood and inverting them to organize and encourage resistance, invisible man's speech does two things. First, it makes clear that the law is merely an instrument of state power, a set of papers like Bledsoe's letters that enslave even when they promise freedom. Second, it demonstrates a dialectical mode of radical critique. It subverts the uplift ideology of the College by unlocking a radical potential contained within its very rhetoric, a potential that the repressive implementation of that rhetoric cancels but does not entirely erase. In this way, he renders ragged and unformed the formed, written operation of the law. This is both a negative and a positive dialectical

process, a sociopolitical critique and a proposition for reappropriating the promises of which African Americans have been dispossessed (272-81).

Invisible man stumbles on this dialectic accidentally, in the course of his speechmaking. It is less a conscious effort on his part than an artistic possibility, a deconstructive property inhering in art (oratory) itself. In this way, his speech is a blues performance: by reiterating and retelling the narrative that dispossesses African Americans, he doesn't document it but transcends it—he finds freedom in the midst of catastrophe, setting loose a ragged utopian potentiality contained within formalized institutional and state discourse. This hermeneutic is introduced by the black folk figure invisible man encounters the morning of his visit to Emerson's office, and who calls himself Peter Wheatstraw. Wheatstraw is "pushing a cart piled high with rolls of blue paper" and singing a blues. He confronts invisible man with folk word games, compelling him to recall folkways that preceded his training at the College. The blues lyrics and the references to Jack the Rabbit and Jack the Bear all invoke a folk identity whose primary content is that it lies outside of institutional definition. His cart is filled with architectural blueprints, destined to be thrown out, that he has collected: "I guess somebody done changed their plans. . . . I asked the man why they getting rid of all this stuff and he said they get in the way so every once in a while they have to throw 'em out to make place for the new plans. Plenty of these ain't ever been used, you know." Hence, Wheatstraw can make occasional money hauling them away: "There's a day's work right here in this stuff." When invisible man laments such waste, saying "You have to stick to the plan," Wheatstraw rebukes his naïveté: "You kind young, daddy-o." He departs, singing a blues verse: "*She's got feet like a monkeeeee / Legs / Legs, Legs like a maaad / Bulldog.*" Invisible man remarks on the "strangeness" of these lyrics: "Was it about a woman or about some strange sphinxlike animal? Certainly his woman, no woman, fitted that description" (172-7).

This puzzling scene is a crucial for understanding the novel's blues practice. While Peter Wheatstraw was the stage name of a real blues singer named William Bunch,<sup>15</sup> this character does not invoke Bunch or any other real referent, but a general folk type. Ellison later explained: "Peter Wheatstraw is a mythological figure that any number of people are named because they possess certain qualities" (*Living* 281-2).

Ellison's Wheatstraw is an imaginative rendering rather than a mimetic depiction of the black folk—and as both a folk riddler and an urban tramp with “Charlie Chaplin pants” who seizes random opportunities to make a day's wage, he is another of Ellison's lumpen-folk figures. Just as he reminds invisible man of a pre-institutional black folk identity, he offers a critique of institutional forms. His blueprints are “blues prints”: the transformative, mobile practice of the blues (or Marxist science) captured in print, ragged possibility formed into delimited paper plans. He warns invisible man against fetishizing such plans, and invisible man will soon find out from Emerson's son that “sticking to” the plan of the College for so long has cost him. But Wheatstraw also suggests that the novel's politics do not involve an out-and-out assault on institutionalized, articulated, planned form: he is not simply disposing of the blueprints, but collecting and recycling them: “I got damn near enough to build me a house if I could live in a paper house like they do in Japan” (175). He appropriates this paper for his own uses, suggesting that political/institutional forms must be singularly evaluated and inserted back into the ragged flow of the social that the lumpen-folk figure inhabits. Wheatstraw thus advocates the dialectical process of critique invisible man will later employ at the eviction. And his blues song suggests how a novel like *Invisible Man*—a printed text trying to emulate the generative practice of the blues—can avoid becoming a blueprint of its historical moment (or of any one finite historical political program) by *avoiding referentiality*. Just as this Wheatstraw is not a real blues singer but an interpretation of a folk persona, his blues reference no real extra-literary woman or “sphinxlike animal” but produce something *new*: a transposition of sexual experience into the hip language and riddling form of the blues. Wheatstraw, with his blues and blueprints, is the very figure of the text's formal and theoretical maneuvering.

These conceptual dynamics also incorporate the novel's treatment of the Brotherhood, which is not the Communist Party and which doesn't exist in the real world any more than Wheatstraw's monkey-footed woman does. If the College is a politically-moderate institution, seeking to accommodate existing power structures (and thus largely complicit with them) in its representation of African-American needs, the Brotherhood differs on two major grounds. First, it purports to offer a radical program that cannot be accommodated within the terms of the present, and its universalism means it represents

both blacks *and* non-blacks—or to put the matter slightly differently, it represents blacks in non-racially-specific terms, as *not* black but as human “brothers” (“Why do you fellows always talk in terms of race!” Jack rebukes invisible man in an early scene). Otherwise, we get very few specifics of Brotherhood ideology or platforms in the novel. When invisible man asks Jack what the Brotherhood stands for, he replies: “It’s simple; we are working for a better world for all people. It’s that simple. Too many people have been dispossessed of their heritage, and we have banded in brotherhood so as to do something about it.” Jack also mentions that in this new world, “the joy of labor shall have been restored,” but this is as much emphasis as the Brotherhood gives to labor or the proletariat in its rhetoric. It’s also clear that the Brotherhood is devoted to other constituencies besides African Americans: it pulls out of Harlem in the end, Hambro tells invisible man, because the Brotherhood’s “larger plan” has changed and “the interests of one group of brothers must be sacrificed to that of the whole.” The more specific tenets of Brotherhood are presumably contained in the “books” and “some material that explains our program in detail” that Jack gives invisible man to study for his first speech. Although he does study these papers, in his speech at the arena he instead invokes a general “old down-to-earth, I’m-sick-and-tired-of-the-way-they’ve-been-treating-us-approach.” It’s important that we never see the content of the materials Jack gives invisible man. We know only that the Brotherhood is against “dispossession” (a general sense of the totality of oppressive practices of a present social order that must be surpassed) and for “history”—a concept never closely aligned with a recognizably Marxist conception, but one standing for a more general sense of objective determination that cancels the need for individual political action and grants authoritarian control to the Brotherhood leaders, the scientists who know where history is going. This representational decision makes the referent of Ellison’s imaginary Brotherhood not the Communist Party of the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, but any disciplined party seeking to represent African-Americans in a universalist and radical program (292, 304, 501-2, 342).

Brotherhood history is not quite progressive or emancipatory either. Even though its leaders drink to “History and to Change,” what’s more often emphasized in their rhetoric and practice is not the necessity of historical change, but history as a standard

and guarantee of Brotherhood orthodoxy. When invisible man engages in inventive rhetorical exhortation (the arena speech) or in political maneuvering (using Tod Clifton's funeral to rally the Harlem masses back to Brotherhood), he is rebuked for threatening the authority of the leadership. It becomes clear—quicker for the reader than for invisible man—that the Brotherhood is actually, like the College, more committed to self-preservation in the present than to effective social change. The leadership reprimands invisible man for organizing Clifton's funeral because Clifton shamed the Brotherhood in selling his Sambo dolls. But invisible man insists that the people of Harlem “don't think in such abstract terms.” As he says to Jack, “All you see in Clifton's death is that it might harm the prestige of the Brotherhood. You see him only as a traitor. But Harlem doesn't react that way.” Indeed, invisible man has organized Harlem in response to “the shooting down of an unarmed black man” (467-8).

Despite the political efficacy of his actions, by acting without the leadership's consent, he has threatened their authority, an authority backed up by claims of access to the objective reality of a totalized history. Invisible man, in this scene, expresses the limitations of that history: the “gin mills and the barber shops and the juke joints and the churches,” “beauty parlors,” and “cheap tenement[s]” of Harlem all offer an “unrecorded history” to which the Brotherhood, in its universalism and its desire to conserve its power, is deaf (471). He here anticipates Robin D.G. Kelley's claim that the spaces of black collective politics “tend to fall between the cracks of political history—spaces as diverse as barber shops, bars, and benevolent societies” (52-3). Ellison is not rejecting radical politics but indicating that the particular, local social needs and political practices of African-Americans (i.e., responses to racist police brutality) cannot be adequately represented within an organization that represents blacks in non-racial terms and requires them to sacrifice, when necessary, their needs to the needs of other Brotherhood groups. He thus articulates a necessary and perhaps unavoidable problem faced by any universalist, inclusive political program.

In granting itself authority as an institution, the Brotherhood puts itself in the way of wholesale social change; by seeking to control both the pace and form of social transformation, it blocks transformation. Ellison goes on to attribute the Brotherhood's conservatism to an inability to comprehend the ontological fluidity of American society.

The novel posits the American social landscape as unpredictably interwoven, chaotic, and complex. Radical programs that cannot grasp that complexity, and that seek to occlude or deny it, are thus ineffective at doing anything other than preserving their institutional selves. This refusal of complexity is the flaw of Ras the Exhorter's brand of black nationalism as well. Ras condemns all whites—including the Brotherhood—for seeking to “enslave” blacks, and calls for a “glorious movement of black people. *Black people!*” If the Brotherhood is too universalist to meet the particular needs of blacks, Ras makes the opposite mistake: he's too essentialist to grasp the ways blacks are complexly involved with the totality of the American scene. Ras is “a madman in a foreign costume” and Jack rages at invisible man by “spluttering and lapsing into a foreign language” (558, 473). Both are foreign in the generic sense: that is, both ignore the specificities of *American* society, history, and culture. Invisible man thus recognizes that all of the novel's mis-leaders miss “the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine” (559). This emphasis on American identity is not a transcendent celebration of the U.S. state, but a call to incorporate within any political program the actual social, racial, and political contradictions of American life. The novel's critique of the Brotherhood is that its blueprints, its papers of political position, its subordination of individual identity to collective discipline (figured by the paper on which invisible man's Brotherhood pseudonym is recorded), and its formalized vision of history are all inadequate to the unformed utopian impetus it offers: “a better world for all people.”

Invisible man must learn to find the unformed, chaotic energies of the social that resist incorporation into institutionalized political form. The novel is not a *bildungsroman*, but a demonstration of epistemological discovery and theoretical practice. The embodiments of chaos are lumpen-folk figures—like Peter Wheatstraw—and what to do about that chaos is the novel's central question. Before invisible man gives his speech at the sports arena, he remembers “a great abandoned hole that had been the site of a sports arena that had burned before my birth.” All that remained from the arena is its basement, a hole filled with “weirdly bent and rusted rods,” “used for dumping” and filled with “stagnant water.” In his youth, he recalls, a “Hooverville shanty” lay between this hole and a railroad yard. He then has a vision of this scene:

I saw a man come out of the shanty and start up the path which led to the walk above. Stopped and dark and sprouting rags from his shoes, hat and sleeves, he shuffled slowly toward me, bringing a threatening cloud of carbolic acid. It was a syphilitic who lived alone in the shanty between the hole and the railroad yard, coming up to the street only to beg money for food and disinfectant with which to soak his rags. Then in my mind I saw him stretching out a hand from which the fingers had been eaten away and I ran—back to the dark, and the cold and the present. (337)

The vision describes the relationship of politics to theory in symbolic topographical terms. Between the railroad yard (the fluidity and mobility of modernity that technology enables and that the lumpen occupy—the figurative possibility of the marginal) and the hole (the refuse of modernity—the material limitation of the marginal), the lumpen-folk figure (organically “sprouting rags”) beckons for aid. The syphilitic whose fingers have been eaten away is a figure of human need that persists outside of social and political paradigms, and whose raggedness—the sign of destitution *and* of the unformed—offers new possibilities and foreclosed-upon options from out of his exclusion. The lumpen-folk figure here suggests to the reader that just as the College is unable to help Trueblood or the mad veterans at the Golden Day, the Brotherhood will be unable either to meet the material needs of the excluded or to seize upon the opportunities they offer.

After witnessing Clifton’s murder by the police, invisible man descends to the subway, pondering over Clifton’s decision to “plunge outside history” and reject Brotherhood, the only epistemological paradigm that, invisible man believes, gives meaning to black life. He starts to realize that it is *possible* to plunge outside history—that, in other words, there *are* unformed, murky realms of alterity beyond the Brotherhood’s program. Hence, he notices how, in the subway, “[b]its of paper whirled up in the passage of air, settling quickly as a train moved past.” The complexity of American modernity can unsettle formed, written paradigms. Invisible man thus ponders the socially-unwritten: “What did they think of us transitory ones? Ones such as I had been before I found Brotherhood” who were “too distant from the centers of historical decision to sign or even to applaud the signers of historical documents? We who write no novels, histories or other books.” He is grasping the conceptual dialectic of rags and paper, the contradiction between form and non-form.

He then encounters three black zoot-suit-clad youths and imagines them as “men outside of historical time” who “didn’t believe in” and probably “had never heard of” Brotherhood. These “transitory” figures “who shoot up from the South into the busy city like wild jacks-in-the-box” combine folk practices with modernity, “speak a jived-up transitional language full of country glamour, think transitional thoughts, though perhaps they dream the same old ancient dreams.” They thus figure a social complexity that Brotherhood can neither account for nor represent. Invisible man is ascribing a significance to these youths that certainly exceeds what they are actually capable of, in political terms. But it’s the process of his analysis that matters, for he now questions Brotherhood: “What if Brother Jack were wrong? What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and the boys his ace in the hole?” (438-40). Despite Houston Baker’s characterization of this scene as “an enlargement of perspective that alters [invisible man’s] notions of historicity altogether” (62), invisible man’s speculations here aren’t such a departure from Brotherhood as they might seem. By personifying history as a gambler, he still assigns it an objective determinative capacity apart and alienated from the actions of individuals. He hasn’t supplanted Brotherhood with an alternative so much as discovered exceptions to Brotherhood. He has, as a thinker, moved to the limits of the paradigm that had until recently constituted a “scientific,” epistemologically-secure account of sociopolitical process. He has found raggedness in discovering how modernity’s fluid underground (secret) workings (i.e., the subway) unsettle finalized paper documents and standing knowledge.

Rinehart is a more complex phenomena. After invisible man is rebuked by the Brotherhood for organizing Clifton’s funeral, he is sent to Brotherhood theorist Hambro to be re-disciplined. On his way there through Harlem, he is set upon by Ras the Exhorter, who accuses him of complicity with the Brotherhood’s decision to de-emphasize the needs of Harlem. Fleeing Ras, he disguises himself with dark green glasses and a wide, sharpie-style hat. He is now mistaken by nearly everyone he encounters for Bliss Rinehart, an underworld numbers man, pimp, storefront preacher, etc.—in fact, the “etc.” is the true definition of Rinehart, for what matters with Rinehart is not the various roles he plays simultaneously, but the fact that the complex chaos of the urban American scene allows him to do so. Rinehart is a figure of the conceptual

remainder, of the creative appropriations and re-definitions that lie below the level of established theoretical perception, the figure of the conceptual remainder. As invisible man explains, “I thought and began trying to place Rinehart in the scheme of things. He’s been around all the while, but I have been looking in another direction.” He then begins to question “[w]hat on earth was hiding behind the face of things?” (493). Rinehart further catalyzes invisible man’s discovery of the limits of his knowledge and the need to expand and revise that knowledge from the perspective of those limits. In Althusserian terms, he comes to see knowledge as a perpetual *practice* rather than as a final set of truth claims.

Rinehart is both “rind” and “heart,” identity tied to nothing other than its performance, a fluidity of self-definition that seems initially like a celebration of the American Dream and the promise of democratic individualism. “He is,” Ellison later explained, “a figure in a country with no solid past or stable class lines; therefore he is able to move about easily from one to the other” (*Collected Essays* 223). But as the personification of an ontological claim about American society, Rinehart is not at the same time the personification of a political claim: he is *not* the novel’s model for political action. His full name is Bliss Proteus Rinehart (*Collected Essays* 110), and his full name qualifies the freedom suggested by his surname. Ellison reused Bliss as the name of the main character in his unfinished second novel. There, Bliss is born to a white woman who has falsely accused black jazz musician Alonzo Hickman’s brother of rape. As a result of the accusation, the brother was lynched and Alonzo fears the same fate. Having nowhere else to turn, the white woman comes to Alonzo to deliver her child, which is not Alonzo’s brother’s. The entangled moral, racial, and social complexities of this situation lead Alonzo to renounce an initial desire for revenge and to accept the human responsibility of raising the child himself. This will be a chance to critique racist ideology, “to prove there was something stronger than all their ignorant superstition about blood and ghosts.” He names the child Bliss “*because that’s what they say ignorance is*. Yes, and little did I realize that it was the name of the old heathen life I had already lost” (*Juneteenth* 311).

Blissfulness—ignorance, naïvete, innocence—is here the condition of seeing America in racial and moral terms of black and white and *not* seeing the fluidity,

negotiation, and accidents that emerge between those terms. But the process of moving from bliss to knowledge is, in *Invisible Man*, a process undergone not by Rinehart but by the protagonist. Rinehart embodies a fluidity that is blissfully non-self-aware: he is the object rather than the subject of the novel's theoretical work. His middle name, Proteus, references the shape-changing god of Greek myth. Ellison would use Proteus as the figure for American social flux, but insisted that the duty of the novelist was, like Odysseus in *The Odyssey*, to *wrestle* with Proteus. Proteus "stands for both America and the inheritance of illusion [bliss, ignorance] through which all men must fight to achieve reality" (*Collected Essays* 154). Ellison does not posit the fluidity of the American scene as a self-sufficient politics. Rather, he is presenting fluidity as an ontological pre-given that must be seized, apprehended, and analyzed by political organizations. Rinehart stands for the enabling sociocultural context, not the subject, of politics in America—Ellison is romanticizing neither the criminal lumpen nor the American Dream.

Invisible man realizes this truth of Rinehart painfully. A man in Harlem warns him against being Rinehart: "don't let nobody make you act like Rinehart. You got to have a smooth tongue, a heartless heart and be ready to do anything" (493). Occupying social fluidity without a guiding purpose leads one to sacrifice principle and "do anything," as the gangster Rinehart does. But invisible man ignores this warning. He is frustrated by the Brotherhood's betrayal of Harlem and seeks a new political path. Yet he admits:

I saw no possibility of organizing a splinter movement, for what would be the next step? . . . I felt that somewhere between Rinehart and invisibility there were great potentialities. But we had no money, no intelligence apparatus, either in government, business, or labor unions; and no communications with our own people except through unsympathetic newspapers, a few Pullman porters . . . and a group of domestics who reported the fairly uninteresting private lives of their employers. (511)

Lacking readymade institutions to politically organize, he decides instead to adopt "Rinehart methods." He will try to convince the Brotherhood that Harlem is behind it while working behind this "rind" to undermine their efforts. He thinks this strategy is what his grandfather's cryptic deathbed advice prescribes: "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction" (16). But in the midst of the riot, he decides that not only has the Brotherhood instigated the riot so as to make

political martyrs of its Harlem constituents, but that he has unwittingly advanced that plot by misrepresenting Harlem to the leadership. “By pretending to agree” with Brotherhood policy, “I *had* indeed agreed” (553). Because he renounced the hard work of organizing his own political movement, he has realized the costs of political irresponsibility. Or in other words, he has mistaken Rinehartism as a motivated distinction *between* rind and heart, in which the former masks the subversion of the latter. In reality, Rinehartism is the *identity* of rind and heart: fluidity without principle and without content—a resource or catalyst for politics, not a politics in itself.<sup>16</sup>

The riot demonstrates the dangers of abandoning mass political leadership and organization. In the midst of the riot, invisible man encounters a group of Harlemites directed by Dupre, who are looting and gathering coal oil in order to burn down their tenement building. Dupre is a transitory figure like the zoot-suiters, the figure of the folk thrust into urban modernity. His name literally means “of the meadow” in French, and he uses a cotton-picking sack to collect his loot (540). Invisible man falls in with Dupre and his men, who raid a hardware store for oil, which they gather in buckets (543). By doing so, they subvert the rhetoric of Booker T. Washington, whose accommodationist advice to Southern blacks is parroted by invisible man in his speech to the whites at the opening smoker: “Cast down your bucket where you are” and “[cultivate] friendly relations with the southern white men” (29-30). Dupre and his men cast down their buckets instead to destroy a building (and the principle of material and racial oppression it embodies) established by whites—so far, they seem a revolutionary group. As they prepare to burn the building, invisible man describes them working like “moles deep in the earth” (547-8). The simile is a textual allusion with triple significance. In the first act of *Hamlet*, when the prince is urging his confederates to swear not to reveal their encounter with the ghost of Hamlet’s father, the ghost echoes Hamlet’s injunction from beneath the stage. “Well said, old mole,” Hamlet responds. “Canst work i’ th’ earth so fast? / A worthy pioneer!” (1.5.161-2). Later, Hegel would use this line to describe the workings of history. As Margreta De Grazia explains, for Hegel, Spirit, the animating force of history, resembles “a mole tunneling its way through earth toward light” and “[a]t some point in the near future it will break through the crust of the earth dividing it from the enlightening sun and attain at long last its emancipatory end” (23). This notion of history

as an objective force working on its own aligns with the Brotherhood's understanding of history. Marx, in an 1856 speech, would recode Hegel's abstract Spirit in materialist terms while preserving the Shakespearean allusion, referring to "the old mole that can work in the earth so fast, that worthy pioneer—the Revolution" (578). Dupre's men, invisible man believes, are the real agents of revolutionary change—proceeding objectively, on their own, without thought of the Brotherhood or other political leadership, and improving on Hamlet's father by taking their *own* vengeance.<sup>17</sup> "They've done it, I thought. They organized it and carried it through alone; the decision their own and their own action" (548).

But the reader knows better. For one, Dupre's name also suggests "Duper"—he's duping his followers as well as the protagonist. Secondly, in describing the men as moles working in the earth, invisible man preserves a notion of history as something happening beyond his control or political guidance: he fetishizes the masses just as the Brotherhood fetishizes an abstract history. His name also suggests a reference to W.E.B. Du Bois and his position on the leadership responsibilities of the black bourgeois "Talented Tenth": Dupre is more an elite vanguard leader like Brother Jack rather than an organic organizer of and from the masses. Finally, while burning the tenement might be a symbolic blow against the current social order if the building is interpreted as a synecdoche for that order, the act really just puts desperate Harlemites out on the street. Dupre ignores the pleas and protests from the building's women and children, including that of a pregnant woman: "You know my time's almost here. . . . If you do it now, where am I going to go?" (546). Mass or organic leadership is not a substitute for the formation of political programs: while the urban, lumpen-folk black masses may possess the capacity for organization and action, both processes must be directed in order for them to be effective and non-deleterious.

So having found the tendency of institutions to betray black needs and foreclose upon the raggedness of the social (its unformed and uncodified, spontaneous energies and potentials), yet having also realized the political necessity of institutions to form that raggedness into effective praxis, invisible man retreats into hibernation in order to take stock of the dilemma. The solution he proposes has already been suggested by Peter Wheatstraw, and in the epilogue it is expressed in terms of invisible man's tentative

interpretation of his grandfather's advice. "[Y]essing them to death and destruction" (564) now means, he ventures, not a Rinehart politics of strategic deception, but an affirmative political practice. "Could he have meant—hell, he must have meant the principle, that we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence." Using this tentative interpretation of his grandfather's words, invisible man proposes:

we, most of all, had to affirm the principle, the plan in whose name we had been brutalized and sacrificed—not because we would always be weak nor because we were afraid or opportunistic, but because we were older than they, in the sense of what it took to live in the world with others and because they had exhausted in us, some . . . of the human greed and smallness, yes, and the fear and superstition that had kept them running. (574)

It is the duty of the oppressed—both white and black, "all the others in the loud, clamoring semi-visible world"—to affirm a principle while critiquing the perversion or betrayal of that principle by those men in power. Just as Peter Wheatstraw does with the blueprints he recycles and potentially reuses, invisible man proposes unlocking and affirming the "principle" contained within the formal paradigms of "Jack and his kind . . . and . . . Norton and his" even as those paradigms are critiqued and deconstructed from a critical position (574-75). Or to put it in terms that Wheatstraw might: you can't always afford to stick to the plan, but you have to find what's valuable in those plans even as you interrogate their limitations and make new plans. Commitment to transformative political practice is paradoxically anchored in a posture of uncertainty or ambivalence toward that practice. If we align the epilogue with the uncertainty characteristic of Cold War liberalism—a fetishized state of moral ambiguity from which one renounces radical transformation as an authoritarian trap—we miss the *dialectic* between radical politics and ambivalence that the novel has been thinking through.

What is the principle to be affirmed? Invisible man describes it as the democratic principle of the Founding Fathers, but one must consider carefully how Ellison understands that principle. For just as the specific political content of the College and the Brotherhood are occluded by the formal decision to construct them as non-referential figures internal to literary practice, very little content is assigned to "the principle on which the country was built," either in *Invisible Man* or in Ellison's extra-literary pronouncements. In his National Book Award speech, he proclaimed: "The way home we

seek is that condition of man's being at home in the world, which is called love, and which we term democracy." He would later refer to "that simple state of human certainty and stability . . . and communion which is sometimes called love, brotherhood, democracy, or sometimes simply the good life." Much later, in 1992, he described "the Constitution and the Bill of Rights as composing "the acting script which future Americans would follow." "The Founders' dream was a dream of felicity," and the history of America is, for Ellison, the history of attempts to make that dream a reality (*Collected Essays* 154, 705, 855). Democracy is non-specific for Ellison. As he describes it in these instances, it mainly means the abstract potentials of love, happiness, and non-alienation—"brotherhood" with a lower-case b.

In *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson argues that "the effectively ideological is also, at the same time, necessarily Utopian." That is, all cultural and political texts, even those espousing the most retrograde orientations (fascism, racism, nationalism) contain within them a "Utopian impulse" or "universal value inconsistent . . . with its more immediate ideological vocation." While hesitating to assign a content to that utopian impulse, Jameson often associates it with collective social life (*Political* 286, 288, 290-1). Finding that utopian energy while critiquing the ideological forms in which it is wrapped constitutes, for Jameson, the positive heart of Marxist analysis. In a more recent piece, he offers a dialectical parsing of institutional form that seems distinctly Ellisonian: "with the onset of what we call postmodernity and globalization," he observes, "institutions seem to have taken the place of individuals or at least of our illusions of individuality, at the same time dispelling all the older categories of success and revolt or ambition and alienation." Yet institutional forms also contain a "Utopian dimension" in "their collective existence and structure" ("How Not" 581-2). *Invisible Man's* figures of institutional leadership—Bledsoe, Ras, Jack, etc.—must be grasped in a similarly dialectical manner. As John S. Wright observes, "vision and impaired vision co-exist" in each. Jack's reductive "science," for instance, "though fascistically brutal, conveys truths without which organized political action is inconceivable" (114).

Like Wheatstraw finding new uses for useless blueprints, Ellison asks us to affirm the utopian and reject the repressive in sociopolitical institutions. This is how Ellison approaches the democratic state and the American ideal. Democracy, for Ellison, names a

general utopian impulse that cannot be wholly identified with any one political *document*: the texts of the Founding Fathers, the pamphlets of the Brotherhood, or the uplift paradigms of the College are only individual blueprints for implementing that principle. The dialectical hermeneutic of salvaging the utopian while critically deconstructing the specific blueprint is what invisible man means when he refers to a politics that could be “an expression of love” (452).

*Invisible Man* is the practical demonstration of this politics at work in literature. Its object of representation is not the Depression and World War II eras, and its targets of critique and avowal are not Communism, black nationalism, liberalism, or Americanism. Rather, out of a context informed by those eras and political discourses, Ellison constructs an abstract model of conceptual and political work tailored to the specific ontology of American society with its complex weave of many strands. The narrative of invisible man’s experiences enacts that work: each time he thinks he has discovered a political form that will adequately represent him and his people, he encounters figures and experiences beyond the bounds of that form that make the form’s limits visible. These encounters eventually spur invisible man to further thought and analysis. The figures involved are often the lumpen-folk types of Ellison’s 1930s fiction, but they are repositioned here as catalysts for theoretical progress rather than as self-sufficient political agents. Their rags embody what remains outside, beyond, and prior to the papers of political institutions. In this way, the novel examines both the utopian validity and practical limitations of political movements, judging each against the abstract utopian principle of felicity and the fluidity of American contexts. In the end, the political vision Ellison offers is nothing more specific than that dialectical critical theoretical movement. The novel comes to a close as invisible man decides to return to society: “I’ve overstayed my hibernation, since there’s a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play” (581). But we don’t see *how* he puts his new insights to work. Instead, his resolution is followed by nothing but blank paper. But blank paper, of course, is what the novel has been working toward, both conceptually and formally. As a blueprint yet to be drawn, a form to be cautiously wrought out of the ragged (i.e., unformed) chaos of America, blank paper is where all utopian possibilities—the abstract, generalized “spirits” of Communism or Americanism—begin. To reiterate the

blues/blueprint distinction in the Wheatstraw scene, a blues politics experiments with “blues prints” for *future* buildings while applying positive and negative dialectical critiques to blueprints for present buildings.

By renouncing referentiality in favor of an abstract level of representation, by constructing invisible man’s personality and character in “thinker-tinker” terms of practical theoretical processes, and by tying its symbolism to sociopolitical theory rather than abiding aestheticist pleasures, Ellison’s novel appropriates and adapts the received literary forms of the modernist novel, the bildungsroman, and the protest novel. Like the blues singer and Althusser’s scientific Marxist theorist, Ellison’s craft appropriates given forms in order to produce something new. As invisible man, in his vision of the iron bridge, cries out the need to appropriate technology (the givens of modernity) in the name of humanity, Ellison appropriates literary and theoretical technique in the name of utopia.

The writing of *Invisible Man* is the novel’s final figure for the transformative action it strives toward. When asked in 1974 if *Invisible Man* was a protest novel, Ellison replied: “I would say simply that in the very act of trying to create something, there is implicit a protest against the way things are, a protest against man’s vulnerability before the larger forces of society and the universe” (*Collected Essays* 544). As Louis Althusser argued, practical *production*—creating the new, whether in politics, philosophy, or art—defines the scientific, revolutionary character of Marxism. In its delineation of a generic conceptual dialectic of paper and rag, political form and utopian impulse; and in its harnessing of non-realist symbolic strategies to enact that dialectic within the bounds of literary form; *Invisible Man* is the blues print of Marxism as a mobile, anti-originary, ever-developing production.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> I thus expand the work of recent critics who have identified threads of continuity between the Communist left and the novel. Christopher Hobson argues that *Invisible Man* transposes, into mythic or universalist terms, African-American radical thought and political strategies from the World War II moment; Frederick T. Griffiths argues that the images and symbols of *Invisible Man* encode events in the life of Angelo Herndon, a famous 1930s black Communist organizer and intellectual; and William Maxwell finds that the novel’s concepts of temporality and history derive from Marxist theory and theories of black modernization that Ellison worked out in his Communist writings.

<sup>2</sup> The prehistory of *Invisible Man* has been taken up by two recent major studies, John S. Wright’s *Shadowing Ralph Ellison* and Barbara Foley’s *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man*. Wright links the novel’s political agenda to the 1940s and to African-American concerns

with leadership that emerged after World War II. While offering shrewd insights into *Invisible Man*'s theorization of leadership and its implementation of a blues aesthetic, Wright clearly distinguishes both from Marxism, which he conflates with reductive orthodoxy. Wright sees the novel developing Ellison's growing interest in the work of philosophers and cultural critics like Kenneth Burke, Lord Raglan, Constance Rourke, Miguel de Unamuno, and others. This is a traditional account of the influences on *Invisible Man*, and it's not one I seek to displace. Ellison *was* influenced, in the novel's long gestation, by Unamuno's existentialism, by Burke's theory of dramatic action and philosophies of literary form, and by Raglan's understanding of the mythical and ritual hero. Furthermore, Barbara Foley has demonstrated that Ellison's influence by such sources was inflected by—rather than at odds with—his 1930s and 1940s leftist political commitments (*Wrestling* 69-107).

Foley's book argues that Ellison was only gradually able to "wrestle" down those commitments in writing *Invisible Man*. She provides the only sustained scholarly treatment of his 1930s and 1940s writings, recovering the full extent of Ellison's engagement with leftist thought and proletarian literature. In her readings of the manuscript drafts of *Invisible Man*, she traces the way Ellison's revisions and excisions from 1945 to 1952 reflect his gradual move away from the left toward patriotism and Cold War liberal anticommunism. While her work helps reopen the question of Ellison and the left, I question her distinction between the 1952 text of *Invisible Man* and *Marxism* (if not the historically-specific policies and discourse of the U.S. Communist Party). *Invisible Man* still contains plenty of material that locates it to the left of Cold War liberalism, I contend. Further, I seek the ways the novel is continuous with key political and aesthetic ideas Ellison was working out in his 1930s and 1940s period. My approach is perhaps not reconcilable with Foley's, since she defines the political significance of literature in historical terms drawn from Depression and Cold War discourse, and is committed to proletarian realism and Communism as the formal and intellectual parameters of American literary radicalism. However, I am indebted to Foley for showing how mainstream modes of reading *Invisible Man* are, in actuality, politically-motivated expressions of Cold War reaction: her work puts the question of Ellison, *Invisible Man*, and politics back on the table after decades of liberal, pragmatist, and patriotic interpretations.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Murray famously claims that "*Invisible Man* was *par excellence* the literary extension of the blues." In Cold War anticommunist language, Murray suggests that the blues honors ambiguity and universal human experience, signifying "the irrepressibility of America itself" while rejecting "clear-cut solutions [i.e., leftist radicalism] for the human situation" (167). Attuned to the Cold War context of Murray's words, Jerry Gafio Watts concurs that Ellison treats the blues as "a metaphor for human existence" and an "indigenously American form of existentialism" that allows him to reject "economic Marxism" (54-55).

<sup>4</sup> My account of Althusser's theory of Marxism as a scientific practice draws primarily on the essay "On the Materialist Dialectic" in *For Marx* and the essays "Theory, Theoretical Practice and Theoretical Formation: Ideology and Ideological Struggle," "On Theoretical Work: Difficulties and Resources," and "Is It Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy?" from the collection *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*. For the most instructive overview of Althusser's efforts on this subject, see Gregory Elliot's *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (55-97). Specialists will no doubt recognize that I am relying on the epistemological and political theses put forth by Althusser in the 1960s texts *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. Althusser later adjusted his understanding of Marxist theory after finding that his account of Marxism as the theoretical science of scientific practice was too far removed from the material realities of class struggle. Like every non-dogmatic thinker, Althusser frequently changed his mind and critiqued himself. But because I find Ellison's work is best explicated by the 1960s texts, I've bracketed consideration of the further twists and turns in Althusser's efforts to define the specificity of Marxist thought.

<sup>5</sup> Ellison read the novel for the first time as a youth growing up in Oklahoma, and it would long influence his understanding of the complex interrelation of American literature and racial conflict (Rampersad 30). In two famous essays—"Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" (1953) and "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" (1958)—Ellison discussed *Huckleberry Finn* as paradigmatic of the dilemmas nineteenth-century white American fiction faced when confronted with the

moral and political problem of racial inequality. In *Was Huck Black?: Mark Twain and African-American Voices*, Shelley Fisher Fishkin recruits Ellison as a source in her argument that Twain drew on African-American vernacular oral traditions in constructing Huck's dialect and voice. In an interview with Fishkin, Ellison expresses his admiration of Twain and admits that *Huckleberry Finn* likely had an "unconscious" influence on *Invisible Man* (136).

<sup>6</sup> John S. Wright has argued that "in Ellison's use, the concept of 'technique' routinely suggests both the literal, organizational, procedural part of executing a work of fiction *and* that much broader system of applied sciences and practical arts by which any society provides its members with those things needed or desired—technology, in other words." As a result, Ellison's emphasis on technique cannot be interpreted simply as referencing "implied suprahuman powers in the how and the what of literary method, style, or manner" (141).

<sup>7</sup> Bland, a member of the South Side Writers Club in Chicago, was a promising critic whose career was cut short by his death in World War II (Wald 267). I know of only two essays by Bland that saw publication. Ellison published Bland's first essay, "Social Forces Shaping the Negro Novel," in *Negro Quarterly*, and he quoted from Bland's second essay, "Racial Bias and Negro Poetry," in his 1945 piece "Richard Wright's Blues."

<sup>8</sup> See Baldwin's essays "Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Many Thousands Gone" from his 1955 volume *Notes of a Native Son*.

<sup>9</sup> Wright wrote to Gold: "To be quite frank, until you spoke up in its defense, I'd all but given up hope that our movement could look deeper into the book, that we could doff our set of stock-reactions and think creatively about it" (qtd. in Fabre 185).

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Alan Wald for bringing this essay to my attention.

<sup>11</sup> Ellison wrote to Wright in May 1940 that *New Masses* was leading the defense of the novel (15 May 1940). Samuel Sillen had published three substantive, intellectually-acute pieces on *Native Son* in the journal in March and April.

<sup>12</sup> Hughes published an earlier version of this scene in an essay entitled "Cowards from the Colleges" in *Crisis* in 1934 (Sundquist, *Cultural Contexts* 56-65).

<sup>13</sup> Foley doesn't address the fact that the Communist Party attributed the rioting in Harlem and other major urban centers (Detroit, Los Angeles) in 1943 to fascist fifth columnists working to incite rebellion among African Americans and Chicanos and thus disrupt the U.S. war effort. While the charge was based on no evidence, it enabled the Communists to avoid confronting contradictions between the U.S.'s anti-fascist war effort and the realities of continued domestic segregation and economic inequality. To quote Alan Wald, attributing the riots to fascist agitators "enabled the Communists to denounce racism and appropriately link it to fascism, but at the cost of minimizing the horrific conditions of ghetto poverty and of depicting the African Americans and Mexican Americans who exploded in pent-up rage and frustration as the unwitting agents of Germany and Japan" (*Trinity* 129). The Communists certainly did not orchestrate the 1943 Harlem Riot, but their pro-war position did compromise their ability to advocate against the material and social conditions that led to the rioting. In that sense, one could construe the riot as overdetermined in part by the Communist Party's betrayal or neglect of its Harlem constituents.

<sup>14</sup> Here, I dialogue with Kenneth Warren, who in *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* proposes that *Invisible Man* is not a timeless creation or artistic triumph, but a product of the specific American race-based power arrangements of its historical moment. Warren does not, however, see the novel as a solidified monument of that past era, a text no longer possessing life because its historical context has passed. Rather, he sees the ability of the novel to still inform our present (and the ability of all Ellison's writings to intervene in ongoing debates in African-American discourse) as evidence that "the key in which black politics has been played remains largely the same as it did prior to

the modern Civil Rights and Black Power movements, when significant portions of black America existed outside of representational politics” (20). Warren posits that *Invisible Man* is of its historical moment, but he rejects a rigid historicism in arguing that that moment is still very much with us. Warren concludes by suggesting that a total transformation of U.S. society would be needed to finally silence *Invisible Man* (107-8). That, I argue, is precisely what *Invisible Man* is trying to theorize and ultimately effect. Warren gives the novel itself scant attention, but in aligning it with Marxism and interrogating its intertwined formal and conceptual operations, I emphasize the transformative rather than epochal dimensions of the text.

<sup>15</sup> For context about Wheatstraw, see Sundquist, *Cultural Contexts* 123-4.

<sup>16</sup> My reading of Rinehart and the zoot-suited youths on the subway is influenced in part by Lawrence P. Jackson’s essay “Ralph Ellison, Sharpies, Rinehart, and Politics in *Invisible Man*.” Drawing on the “zoot-suited, jive-talking sharpie” of African-American urban culture in the 1930s and 1940s, Jackson argued that such types—due to their leisure consumption that rejected bourgeois norms of “hard labor and thrift,” their non-attraction to black nationalism, and their refusal of World War II military service—suggested to Ellison “an example of untapped potential, a form of vanguard revolutionary consciousness” and “a more elegant and allusive sort of theoretical resistance” than that found in more typical literary-protest figures like Bigger Thomas (74, 73). The novel’s subway sharpies, for Jackson, suggest to invisible man that cultural modes of resistance might be more effective than traditional political organizing (83). Rinehart, Jackson argues, symbolizes an infinite possibility and boundless freedom for personal action and self-invention that Ellison associates with the cultural practices of the sharpie. The novel’s concluding lesson is thus a political one: black leadership must be attuned to and cautiously borrow from the sharpie’s world of social and cultural possibility. While Jackson briefly employs the term lumpenproletariat (or “lumpen proletariat” in his text) to think the sharpie, he uses it in a merely descriptive (non-Marxist) manner to mean “the man ‘farthest down’” (78). Jackson’s essay builds on Larry Neal’s earlier influential piece “Ellison’s Zoot Suit,” which positioned the sharpie as the type around which a cultural politics is organized in *Invisible Man*. While I am more interested in the novel’s formal strategies and the ways it utilizes the specific dialectics of Marx’s concept of the lumpenproletariat, I also align myself with Jackson and Neal in variously thinking the novel’s politics of fluidity in terms apart from normative Cold War liberalism.

<sup>17</sup> Ellison reported on the 1943 Harlem Riot for the *New York Post*, describing it as a “naïve, peasant-like act of revenge” (“Eyewitness” 4). While the novel’s fictional riot does not strictly refer to this historical event (Ellison stated in 1963 that while “some” of the riot scene is based on the 1943 riot, the scene is “an imaginative construction which is based upon [historical] pattern” [Graham and Singh 81]), it similarly demonstrates the political inefficacy of spontaneous, unorganized mass destruction.

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## Conclusion

### “Yes, but . . .”: Notes on the Form of Lumpenproletarian Marxism

When I decided to write a dissertation on the lumpenproletariat in U.S. literature, several approaches to the project presented themselves as possibilities. One could focus on the presence of the lumpenproletariat in the literary productions of a key historical period—the Depression, for instance. One could analyze representations of the lumpenproletariat within a given ethnic or racial tradition—African-American expression, for example. One could take a genre studies approach and delineate a genre of “lumpenproletarian literature,” updating the earlier tentative classification of “bottom dogs” novels. One could also attempt a wholesale study of the lumpenproletariat across twentieth-century American literature, history, and culture. Yet all of these methods would be frustrated by the specific stakes of the lumpenproletariat within Marxism, where it is not an empirical term. Yes, it frequently references a diverse if agreed-upon range of sub-class marginal denizens in Marxist discourse. But in Marx’s work, the term exceeds any empirical definition and ultimately figures the ramifications of marginality as a social and theoretical principle. Empirical lumpen types, Marx implicitly realized (even if he didn’t credit the realization), suggest the ontological principle that something always escapes the parameters of a discourse, theory, or social formation. The lumpenproletariat names, therefore, not just those types but the dynamic, generative relation between those types and processes of theoretical and political work. Any study that simply aligned texts from U.S. literature that featured underworld types might well be a study of criminals, vagabonds, sex workers, or the homeless in American writing—but it wouldn’t be a study of the lumpenproletariat.

In *Ragged Figures*, I have tried to adopt a totalized methodology, rather than one confined within disciplinary restraints. I’ve sought to combine insights from a range of Marxist traditions, Western philosophy, poststructuralist theory, African-American literary and cultural studies, the study of the American left, and American political

thought. And I've sought to put these theoretical and critical paradigms on an equal footing with literary form and the fictional texts discussed in my readings. At the risk of a defined (and possibly constraining) disciplinary identity for this dissertation, I've endeavored to work from my primary object of study—the figure of the lumpenproletariat in the writings of Nelson Algren and Ralph Ellison—back to the various cultural, theoretical, historical, and literary conversations that both illuminate and are illuminated by that object. If anything, critical conversations about Algren and Ellison have been marked by a limited conception of what constitutes the field of analytical paradigms relevant to their work. By combining yet respecting the relative autonomy among the disciplinary and creative practices informing my dissertation (form, theory, philosophy, Marxism, history, African-American studies, etc.), I've hoped to challenge assumptions about Ellison and Algren's aesthetic, intellectual, and political projects, as well as let Ellison and Algren illuminate questions, problems, and concepts within the disciplinary models I apply.

I chose to focus on Algren and Ellison because they struck me as the two writers who were writing about criminal, underworld, or dislocated types across their careers; were writing about them in ways that demonstrated an implicit awareness of the indeterminacy and productivity of Marx's concept of the lumpenproletariat; and were most in need of having their literary and political reputations overhauled and reexamined. There were other reasons as well. For one, few writers adjust their literary practice as *often* as Algren and Ellison did over the 1930s-1950s period. It's hard to believe the same author wrote *Somebody in Boots* and *The Man with the Golden Arm*, just as it's hard to believe the same author is behind *Slick* and *Invisible Man*. Algren and Ellison's careers let us see just how the conjunctures of the Depression, World War II, and the Cold War enabled and put different determining pressures on engaged writing. Finally, and this is the point I want to emphasize above all, their work presents the outlines of a very unusual and atypical Marxist approach to writing literature, one I've needed Louis Althusser's own idiosyncratic rendering of Marxism to guide me in unpacking. That approach revolves around two guiding principles we generally don't associate with Marxism: the formal relative autonomy of the literary text and the ontological instability of sociopolitical structures and knowledge paradigms. Unlike most mid-century leftist and

proletarian fiction which is now of mainly historical interest, Algren and Ellison demonstrate a lumpenproletarian literary practice that still speaks to us today.

As I'm writing, around a million people have taken to the streets in Cairo and other Egyptian cities to demand that Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak step down and open the way for democratic reforms of the country's authoritarian government. This action follows similar protests in Tunisia that forced the resignation of Tunisia's president and that have inspired other mass demonstrations across the Arab world. Judged in strictly political terms, the demands of this "Jasmine Revolution" are not radical, focusing on democratic reform and political freedom and calling for an end to government corruption, police brutality, human rights abuses, etc. Yet the event of these protests is something that cannot be confined within political labels of "neoliberal" or "pro-democratic." They have thrown the current political order in the Middle East into instability, a potent state of disruption from which *any* new sociopolitical formation *might* emerge—whether Islamic fundamentalist, pro-Western and neoliberal, or something else. While the rhetoric of the protests in Egypt is couched in liberal-democratic terms, their overdetermined causes are also material in nature, stemming from long-standing economic deprivation and unemployment. Thus, structural transformation is potentially on the table. Finally, the American government's hesitant response to the protests thus far has exposed in dramatic fashion the fundamental contradiction of the U.S. state: between its ideology of freedom and democracy, on the one hand, and its material and political investment in authoritarian states, on the other. The unrest in the Arab world is potentially one of those truly revolutionary moments when possibility suddenly erupts, violently and urgently, within the oppressive realities of the present—when everything we think we know about ideological, social, and political landscapes and discourses is under pressure. Revolutions, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have taught us, happen not because of historical necessity, direct economic causation, or working-class activism. Rather, they are more or less unpredictable events that frequently incorporate these factors but whose potentially transformative power is not identical to them. They are manifestations of non-necessary, non-predetermined *possibility*. They remind us that the new is always possible, that structures of power incorporate loopholes, gaps, and the possibility for accident.

Of course, the protests in Egypt seem far removed from any analysis of Marx's lumpenproletariat. If anything, Marx might see the pro-Mubarak thugs who have instigated violence against the protestors in ways similar to how he saw the Parisian lumpenproletariat in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*—as the pawns of reaction. And he may be right: as Nelson Algren's 1930s work demonstrates, those on the margins of modern capitalist society are often structurally deprived of cognition, let alone political consciousness. There is little about having to shift for a living in the backstreets, back alleys, black markets, railroads, and highways of modernity that is conducive to political radicalization, and *Somebody in Boots* is unequalled in its understanding of that reality. Similarly, the syphilitic hobo invisible man recalls before his arena speech testifies to Ellison's awareness of the utter deprivation of the lumpenproletariat. If orthodox Marxism has tried to console itself for neglect of the lumpenproletariat on the grounds of its criminal, reactionary, or self-interested behavior, Algren and Ellison possessed a more totalized grasp of the material and psychological degradations accompanying social marginality. One doesn't survive on the lumpen margins without recourse to some pretty ugly, quite politically-backwards activity.

Algren and Ellison, in different ways, both made a key epistemological discovery in their treatment of the American lumpenproletariat: they found that the lumpen figure suggests more than its literal self, and is thus a *literary* figure, a mark of some significance just beyond the real. For each, the lumpen figure figured the possibility of the new, the other, the exception, the remainder—whatever lay outside both established discourses and material social structures. The lumpen figure signifies what Ellison called the chaos and fluidity of the American scene. Marx, as we've seen, dismissed this nebulous realm as irrelevant. Algren and Ellison anticipate various deconstructive rhetorics in revaluing the irrelevant as a position of epistemological and political productivity. It's what is not yet counted that really counts and that allows a radical writer to constantly interrogate the limits and foreclosures of existing social, ideological, theoretical, and political paradigms.

In this dissertation, I've presented Algren and Ellison as two writers whose projects can be read as attempts to radicalize, within the bounds of literary form, a principle that both propose, implicitly or explicitly, as an ontology: that certain aspects or

realities of American life and African-American experience trouble the boundaries of delimited statements and programs. The twin figures of the lumpenproletariat and the African American—motivated with equal emphasis by both writers—stand for that deconstructive potential for two reasons: the actual complexity and fluidity of their experiences, and the fact of their marginality to a host of material and discursive constructions, including the labor-capital dialectic, orthodox Marxism, normative American bourgeois ideology, and racialist constructions of national identity. In their figurative appropriations of the experiences and investments of lumpenproletarian types, both writers mobilized the ragged, unformed margins of capitalism and Marxism to produce new directions in political theory and committed literary practice. And in their privileging of racial blackness as the figure of the energizing exception, of the excluded that can be mobilized against the center, they give literary form to a particularly radical, post-essentialist mode of African-American identity.

In the prologue to *Invisible Man*, the protagonist experiences a symbolically-dense, marijuana-fueled vision that incorporates a preacher delivering a sermon on “the ‘Blackness of Blackness’”: “Now black is . . . an’ black ain’t. . . . Black will make you . . . or black will un-make you” (9-10). On one level, these cryptic words introduce one of the novel’s major sociopolitical themes: in America, there are right and wrong kinds of black. In the eyes of Bledsoe and the College, Jim Trueblood and invisible man are both the wrong kind of black. The dazzling white of Optic White paint can only be created with the right kind of black additive. Invisible man’s job toward the end of his tenure with the Brotherhood is to represent Harlem’s masses to the leadership as its idea of the right kind of blacks. The invisibility of African Americans is facilitated by discursive constructions, materialized in institutional forms, of what is or isn’t black identity. Yet the sermon contains a more philosophical lesson as well: black is simultaneously both positivity and negativity, both real and constructed, essential identity and malleable ground of reinvention and redeployment. As Scott Saul explains:

“Black is”: racial identity is irreducibly felt; the basic arrangements of American culture . . . are structured along lines of race. “Black ain’t”: racial identity is the thinnest of fictions . . . a socially invented check on an individual’s ability to invent him- or herself. Ellison’s achievement was, in part, to hold onto this tension between the reality and the fiction of race, to refuse to resolve it. (xiii)

That refusal to resolve the contradiction between blackness as a symbolic or discursive material and blackness as a real subject position is facilitated by Ellison's insistence on the autonomy of literature from the real. In literature, Ellison always argues, the hard facts of experience must be transformed into new forms that offer insights into deeper or more totalized realities lying behind the façade of experience. What I've argued is that one of Ellison's unique contributions to Marxism—the figure of the lumpen-folk—embodies this insistence by figuratively redefining folk authenticity in mobile, politically-agential terms. Algren's *Somebody in Boots* engaged in a similar project, deconstructing its own representational protocols in order to demonstrate literary form's ability to penetrate beyond Cass McKay's limited empirical grasp of the face of things. Isaac Newton Bailey incarnates Ellison's lumpen-folk figure in a story that re-forms what Saul calls the "fiction" of racial identity in order to denounce the real oppression of all marginal identities. Similarly, when Algren describes the American lumpenproletariat as "the people of Dickens and Dostoevsky" in *Nonconformity*, he indicates that this non-class is both real and fictional (77): the lumpen is and the lumpen ain't.

It is no doubt the honorific role played by African Americans and African-American culture in the 1930s Communist milieu (in which both Algren and Ellison were saturated) that in part accounts for this focus on blackness as the symbolic material of inventive literary radicalism. But there is a philosophical and formal explanation as well. Despite their reputations and the standing interpretations of their work, Algren and Ellison were both anti-empiricist in their thought and non-mimetic in their fiction. They assumed that the function of radical literature was to produce the new, not reflect the current. As a result, both knew the realities of black culture, lumpenproletarian misery, racial identity, and the political and cognitive lack imposed on underworld types. But both also knew the potency of these figures and realms as material for formal experimentation—they refused to resolve the contradiction between the fiction and the reality of black and lumpen identities. The formal autonomy of literature, and their commitment to an Althusserian practice of *producing* new ways of thinking and writing about power and marginality in America, enable that refusal.

Hence, in both their works, the African American and the lumpenproletarian not only signal, but inhabit the outside and the exception to American identity and orthodox

Marxism. They locate both writers' work in that nebulous exteriority where the new and unexpected can occur. That exteriority is at once a critical perspective and a productive resource. Both Algren and Ellison would have understood what Ishmael Reed meant at the end of *Mumbo Jumbo*: "I once leafed through a photo book about the West. I was struck by how the Whites figured in the center of the photos and drawings while Blacks were centrifugally distant. The center was usually violent: gunfighting lynching murdering torturing. The Blacks were usually, if it were an interior, standing in the doorway. Digging the center" (210). By being on the margins, Reed proposes, blacks don't simply observe. Rather, they see the "West" as it in fact really is beneath its veneer: violent, oppressive, unredeemable. To see from the margins is to see differently. To look at Marxist proletarianism from the perspective of the lumpenproletariat is to see Marxism in a new light and to open the way for revision. Or as invisible man, in the prologue, describes his experience of listening to Louis Armstrong, "you slip into the breaks and look around" (8). To see America from the perspective of the lumpenproletariat is to know—much more than the increasingly-incorporated worker does—that something's amiss. To see the Allied cause in World War II, and the Communist line on the war, from the perspective of African Americans is to realize the need for a new internationalism. And so on and so forth. The margin not only disrupts, but it produces: it is both negative and positive, both the limit and the new.

Ellison, in reviewing Amiri Baraka's *Blues People*, demonstrates the critical productivity of what Reed calls "digging the center." In a typical Ellisonian move (familiar from essays like "Hidden Name and Complex Fate" and "The World and the Jug"), he objects to Baraka's tendency to see "a rigid correlation between color, education, income and the Negro's preference in music." Ellison argues, of course, that black life is more varied, more unstable, more porous to the flow of ideas and culture in America than Baraka seems to think. Baraka correlates the blues with a mode of black authenticity that middle-class blacks, in the process of embourgeoisement, reject. "But what," Ellison asks, "are we to say of a white-skinned Negro with brown freckles who owns sixteen oil wells . . . and who not only sang bass in a Holy Roller church, played the market and voted Republican, but collected blues recordings and was a walking depository of blues tradition?" The rhetorical form of this argument can be written as

“yes, but . . .”: it’s a mode of analysis that finds the exterior of a statement (what that statement forecloses upon, what it cannot *see* yet alone include or understand) and, from that exterior, questions the validity and usefulness of the statement.

At another point in this review, Ellison takes exception to Baraka’s claim that a slave cannot be a man. “[I]sn’t it closer to the truth that far from considering themselves only in terms of that abstraction, ‘a slave,’ the enslaved really thought of themselves as men who had been unjustly enslaved?” Ellison concludes, therefore: “Slavery was a most vicious system, and those who endured and survived it a tough people, but it was *not* (and this is important for Negroes to remember for the sake of their own sense of who and what their grandparents were) a state of absolute repression” (*Collected Essays* 282, 284). Statements like these—made here about slavery, elsewhere about segregation and Jim Crow—have prompted critics like Jerry Gafio Watts to accuse Ellison of downplaying the reality of power and hierarchy in the United States in favor of a pluralist celebration of freedom and opportunity.<sup>1</sup> As I’ve argued, such criticisms don’t do Ellison justice, or are otherwise unable to think dialectically. Ellison essentially is reminding us here that slavery is *and* slavery ain’t: it *is* a “vicious system” but it *ain’t* “absolute repression.” Possibility persists despite oppressive attempts to regulate it. The proof lies in the richness of black culture, in the solidity of a racial identity and community forged in the New World within and despite enslavement. Algren and Ellison’s work explores this realm (and it’s both a conceptual realm internal to theory and a social realm that pressures established hierarchies) of the exception, margin, and “centrifugally distant.”

The lumpenproletarian practice of Marxist theory and literature, then, is one which is ever aware of the possibility of some new object or insight lying just beyond the bounds of its purview. It’s a radicalism that is committed to both looking from the margins and looking past them, having one eye on the center and one eye seeking out chances for the new. This productive practice is, in differently-emphasized yet ultimately consonant ways, what Althusser’s theory of a scientific Marxism, Algren’s notion of “doing it the hard way,” and Ellison’s concept of the blues all aim to describe. As a lumpenproletarian Marxism, it is not necessarily a Marxism that seeks to locate the actually-existing, empirical lumpenproletariat as the agent of revolutionary change (though such an endeavor—formulated most consistently in the United States by the

Black Panther Party—reflects the central productive and creative impulse of lumpenproletarian Marxism). Lumpenproletarian Marxism as I've proposed it in this dissertation is a mode of thought and writing defined by its form and not its content. It is a practice as mobile as the blues-singing transient: proliferating on the margins, engaging in self-reinvention, digging (and digging beneath—undermining) the center. It is open to the unknown and unforeseen, to the possibility of a true event (like the Jasmine Revolution) whose own internal logic and indeterminacy—not a priori orthodox assumptions—must guide theoretical and political response.<sup>2</sup> Given the peculiar economic and racial dynamics of the United States and the history of the Communist left's discursive framings of those dynamics, African-American and lumpenproletarian experience furnishes, as it did for Algren and Ellison, the political and metaphorical resources for a literary practice of lumpenproletarian American Marxism.

Appropriately, then, one of the foremost political thinkers of the African-American lumpenproletariat, Huey Newton, provides one of the strangest and, for that reason, clearest demonstrations of how this mode of theory works. In a 1970 speech, Newton describes the current geopolitical situation as one in which the “United States as an empire necessarily controls the whole world either directly or indirectly.” This historically new arrangement is distinct from earlier empires of a “primitive sort” (like the Roman Empire) that could claim to control the entire world, when in fact their reach extended only to “what was thought to be the known world.” America is the first true empire—the first to bring the entirety of the world under its hegemony, because “[n]ow, *probably* all of the world is known” (169, emphasis added). As implausible an empirical statement as this is, it indicates that Newton, in his own theory, refuses to make the mistake of the Romans—i.e., to assume that his perception encompasses the entirety of the known. He goes on to propose some political directions in light of the fact that America *probably* dominates the whole of the world, but his insertion of this strange qualifier checks his own thought against orthodoxy: maybe he's wrong, maybe something new—from some unexplored political, social, intellectual, or geographical territory—will force reconsideration. One never knows—and political radicalism can not only incorporate but thrive on such a recognition of uncertainty. As he searches for ways to undermine the center, he also keeps one eye open for the margins. The Black Panther

Party's other major thinker, Eldridge Cleaver (who, as we've seen, was a key theorist of the lumpenproletariat in twentieth-century America), also recognized the tendency of political opportunity to emerge from unforeseeable breakdowns of normal operations of power. The Watts uprising of 1965, he proposed, occurred because "blacks . . . noticed a cop before he had a chance to wash the blood off his hands. Usually the police can handle such flare-ups. But this time it was different. Things got out of hand" (159). Despite the considerable animosity between Ellison and the black radicals of the 1960s and 1970s, both employ variations of the "yes, but..." critical method. Yes, the United States has an unprecedented global hegemony; yes, the Los Angeles police force is an efficient repressive agent: but you never know when things will get out of hand.

Ellison, Algren, Cleaver, and Newton are unusual interlocutors in an academic study. But putting them in conversation is necessary if my study of Algren and Ellison is to break these writers out of the confining parameters of their historical moment. Although they were responding to the specific discursive and material pressures of three different historical periods (the Depression, World War II, and the Cold War), Algren and Ellison's work can't be entirely circumscribed within those periods. As I've shown, standing literary-historical definitions of "Marxism," "radicalism," or "liberalism" from mid century are unable to account for Algren and Ellison's literary politics. Neither writer's work can be fully aligned with proletarian or working-class fiction, didacticism or exhortation, realism, or sociohistorical referentiality. Both practically insist on the distance between literature and the real. Both are invested in a social and philosophical object—the lumpenproletariat—that normative Marxism abjures. Both insist on the ontological fluidity of American social life. Viewed from one perspective, one could associate their work with high modernism, aestheticism, American exceptionalism, or the new liberalism of the postwar era. But in order to do so, one would have to confine oneself to the terms of Marxism as they were generally defined by the Communist movement at mid-century. Algren and Ellison dialogued with and considered those terms but ultimately transcended them. If my dissertation relies heavily on Althusser and on other poststructuralist and post-1950s modes of analysis, it's because critical theory of the postmodern era provides the only ready vocabulary for understanding the inventive, post-essentialist, anti-originary thought and craft of these two writers. Like Walter

Benjamin, who sought to comb the past for its moments and images that would resonate with concerns in the present,<sup>3</sup> I've tried to attend both to how Algren and Ellison's writing illuminates the mid-century period as well as to what it offers readers and critics today. To rigorously historicize Algren and Ellison and refuse critical theoretical paradigms on the grounds that the temporal and national difference of the latter invalidates them is to risk producing a study that merely documents a bygone moment—in other words, it would be to do what I've argued Ellison, in writing *Invisible Man*, went to great lengths to avoid.

Of course, I imagine both writers' insistence on the autonomy and non-referentiality of the literary, and my decision to credit that insistence, will give many readers pause and will raise objections beyond those of a historicist nature. In U.S. literary and cultural studies, we've become accustomed to critiquing literary-representational decisions by reference to a host of extra-literary criteria. Thus, it's easy to charge both Algren and Ellison with romanticizing lumpenproletarian life as one of possibility and occluding the lived realities of the lumpen with clever figurative constructions. I recognize that I've left myself open to the charge that I'm offering another instance of what Madhu Dubey has called the "romance of the residual." She locates in theories of postmodernism, and especially in theories of black postmodernism, a tendency to assign African Americans and other non-whites a privileged status on the margins of a postmodern global totality and to assign black cultural life a residual temporal status within the postmodern moment. African Americans are thus "fetishized as the guarantors of everything that is felt to be at risk in the postmodern era—bodily presence, palpable reality, political intentionality." Theorists like Fredric Jameson, bell hooks, and Edward Soja, Dubey argues, assign the margin a politically-resistant, vibrant cultural force that too often occludes its reality as a non-place of deprivation and material oppression (22, 8). Romancing the residual is one mode of a larger trend Dubey identifies in postmodern thought: the displacing of the sociomaterial by the cultural as the site or mode of political resistance. Or to imagine a specific objection to this dissertation, one might argue that the symbolic potential of lumpen homelessness, drug addiction, or folk positivity not only hides but partially compensates for the real immiseration or challenges faced by subjects in those positions.

Hence, with these two writers the questions of the appropriation of the real within the literary, and a writer's responsibility to the real within his/her appropriation, are especially potent. When Ellison depicts his Depression hoboes as inhabiting a rich world of encounters and fluidity, is he downplaying the brutal facts of hobo life? When Algren deploys drug use as a figure for political resistance, is he giving an honorific gloss to the nightmare of addiction? When it comes to both writers' figurings of African-American identity, such critiques take on further weight. Is it insidious to make symbolic use of blackness, as Algren does in different ways in *Somebody in Boots*, "He Couldn't Boogie Woogie Worth a Damn," and *The Man with the Golden Arm*? Is it responsible of Ellison to figure folk authenticity as proto-political agency, or the blues as a form of universal aesthetic practice? These questions are familiar, and arguments could be made equally against these writers and against my interpretations of their work.

Notions of representational responsibility—or arguments charting proper and good routes of travel between literature and the real—are important to literary criticism simply because representation (in a text, in discourse, in ideology) shapes the real. We can see this representational determination at work in Ellison and Algren's reputations within the academy. Ellison's reputation has been established, within U.S. literary history and African-American studies, in certain ways that, as I've shown, obstruct our ability to read his work clearly and without preconceptions. He comes to us as always-already the black tradition's great post-radical apologist for American democracy, and it takes effort to read him in any other way. Algren comes to us as a pedestrian social realist equally impatient with theoretical subtlety and literary experimentation, and it again takes effort to see his work differently.

On the other hand, as I've argued throughout, the autonomy of literature—its distance from a real that it may, even with strict fidelity, seek to document—is precisely what makes it politically effective. A writer has a degree of freedom (even if constrained by historical and ideological determinants) in producing a text that he or she generally doesn't have in changing real-world conditions. Because the literary figure of the lumpenproletariat is distanced from the actual, extra-literary lumpenproletariat, it can be put to its own constructive uses. Because figures of the black folk, black culture, or blackness itself are metaphorical, they can perambulate with greater freedom on the page.

Neither Algren nor Ellison is naïve enough to think that literature can substitute for actual political struggle: the flip side of claiming the autonomy of the literary is acknowledging that the symbolic play of literature can only go so far, and that an occasion must come when literary gives way to political practice. Finally, both Algren and Ellison had first-hand experience of the lumpen social world they mine in their writing, and both were acutely aware of its actual hardships and limitations. Whatever figurative use these writers make of black and lumpen identities, they do so for the ultimate end of destroying the systems and structures of power and material distribution that created the symbolic possibilities of those identities in the first place.

Nonetheless, figurative license can be a dangerous thing, because the figurative construction of a real object can suggest what an author—as a literary practitioner overdetermined by historically-located structural and ideological factors—*elects* it to suggest. As such, those figures require *differential* critical evaluations. Toni Morrison describes this project in *Playing in the Dark* as the need to examine the aesthetic and theoretical work performed in a given text by an African-American figurative presence. Rather than condemning figurative departures from reality—even departures from real cultural identities and subject positions customarily maligned by power—we must attend to them on their own terms. Doing so with Algren and Ellison, I’ve tried to show, is a test case for demonstrating the specific (or autonomous) political, theoretical, and aesthetic productive capacities of literary form itself.

That productivity—what we might call the power of literature, the something that a text can *do*—is enabled by autonomy from reality. As Algren remarked, all a real drug addict can do is “crawl up in some flophouse and lock the door and go to sleep” (Donohue 124). But the figure of the addict in *The Man with the Golden Arm* can organize a symbolic analysis of Cold War society and dramatize the need to recover lost modes of collectivity. Ellison’s hobo journey to Tuskegee in 1933 was one of violence, desperation, and terror. Yet his refiguration of it in “Hymie’s Bull” can theorize chances for anti-racist resistance. As writers of the lumpenproletariat formed in large part by an encounter with orthodox Marxism, both were attuned to the dialectic of rags and paper implicit in the lumpenproletariat concept. The lumpen are both actually destitute and deprived *and* figuratively mobile and creative, embodying a realm beyond the margins

that is both social and material death *and* space for renewal. The productivity of this concept, like the productivity of literature itself, therefore depends on not collapsing the distance between the real and the figurative, the realistic and the romantic. Or consider the dozens: in this vernacular black mode of verbal sparring, real mothers are insulted but the game depends on not mistaking the insults for reality. As a character in Ellison's unfinished second novel explains: "in the dozens each player tries to say the worst things he can say about the other's mother and father, their families, and the one who gets mad loses the game" (*Three Days* 227). The process and potentials of the ritual come to an end when the distance between the real and its representation is closed—and the one who closes it is the loser.<sup>4</sup> This claim is not, I want to emphasize, to privilege the realm of representation over that of the historical or material, but to insist that reality is not the sole provenance of either realm. For we also lose out when, in vulgar instances of postmodern thought, the literary or cultural or discursive is assigned sole reality. For instance, the assertion—made by prominent black and white intellectuals, political scientists, and cultural figures—that today's American lumpenproletariat, the black "underclass" of the urban ghetto, are enmeshed and invested in a *culture* of poverty and criminality functions to distract attention away from the need for thoroughgoing *material* change (Dubey 28-9). If the orthodox Marxist errs in denying the effectivity and substantiality—the reality—of the superstructural, the critic who fetishizes it makes the same mistake. Nor am I surrendering to a post- or non-Marxist poststructuralism here. What nearly every major, disparate Western Marxist thinker has in common—and I'm thinking here not only of Althusser and Gramsci but also Raymond Williams, Henri Lefebvre, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno—is a commitment to the equally if differentially "real" status of both components of what orthodox Marxism has unhelpfully and inaccurately dichotomized as base and superstructure. Too often, leftist critics who assault representations in the name of the real and the referent (i.e., the material, economic, or historical), which they believe is particularly under threat in our postmodern moment, forget or simplify this Marxist tenet. The trick is to not collapse the dialectic—to keep alive and oscillating the set of possibilities for practice and invention contained between both ends of the rag/paper, limitation/possibility, base/superstructure,

is/ain't paradigm. The one who gets mad, who loses the patience required for this sort of dialectical practice, loses the game.

Critics need to be wary, then, of using the real to police motivated formal and representational decisions in literary texts. At the same time, they must question the real effects of what Morrison calls “imaginative uses” of the real, and here political judgment is unavoidable; here claims about the pernicious, stereotyping, reifying, deconstructive, emancipatory nature of literary texts necessarily emerge and serve to justify critical readings. One must stake one's positions, and I gather no reader of this dissertation has missed my own. Yet I hope to have shown that neither the real nor the literary is the exclusive property of the left or the right. One could generalize and say that critical methods that value literature's removal from reality have tended to be utilized by normative, bourgeois criticism, while methods that critique or deconstruct such removal have tended to be preferred by leftist critics. I've endeavored to show how literary autonomy can in fact be radical, and how such potentially ideological terms like “form,” “craft,” “authorial agency,” and “figurative license” can and have been put to revolutionary uses. It is the *ragged figure* of the lumpenproletariat (with the three-fold implication of epistemological perception, literary form, and theoretical activity invoked by the terms “figure” and “to figure”), not just the lumpenproletariat itself, that has accordingly been this dissertation's object of investigation.

For anyone invested in the necessity of social transformation, Algren and Ellison offer a valuable set of lessons. As writers of the lumpenproletariat instead of the proletariat, they provide an alternative Marxist aesthetic that is grounded in the needs and experiences of marginalized peoples and that claims the relative autonomy of literary form from historical and social reality. They introduce into radical literary practice numerous conceptual themes and tendencies—marginality, deconstruction, textual and figurative play—often associated with non-radical caricatures of poststructuralism. They help us revalue the applicability and usefulness of Althusserianism for reading American literature and culture, and they explicate some of the aporias and contradictions within Althusser's thought. They demonstrate a practice of Marxist writing that relies not on reflection, reference, and denunciation, but on production, experimentation, and exploration.

Finally, Algren and Ellison help us see what's happening in Egypt and the Arab world. Whatever outcome emerges when the dust settles in Cairo—and the examples of 1968 and 1989 suggest little reason for radical optimism—the event of the uprising has testified to the ontological reality of possibility. Even in the most authoritarian systems—dictatorships, Jim Crow, slavery—the new can rise up from the margins and overwhelm the center. Algren and Ellison insisted that such possibility was contained within the overdetermined complexity of the American scene, and that political work and organization had to recognize it, account for it, and utilize it. Revolutions are not magical or messianic events: they are determined, but determined not by history or labor conditions or activist instigation but by the chaos contained within social structures. The only reason they seem to take us unawares—and thus become described as singular years in history: 1789, 1848, 1871, 1917, 1968, 1989, 2011—is that they are overdetermined by the uneven, internally-differential totality of what Althusser called the social structure in dominance.

Yet the uprisings in Egypt have also been an epistemological event: they have brought to life the margins of the U.S.'s rhetorical emphasis on democracy and freedom. They have made clear to numerous observers around the world, of whatever political persuasion, that the U.S. champions democracy and freedom *except—except* when it threatens U.S. or Israeli interests, *except* when the stability of the global market is at stake, or (what is really the essential, underlying exception) *except* when things as they are become thrown into any degree of uncertainty. Power and markets fear the new and the nebulous, the variable, the complication, the exception, the unknown. That's why in their complex experiments with the ragged figures of the American lumpenproletariat, Algren and Ellison forged a problematic of Marxist writing that has outlived the collapse of Communism, the vogue of the proletarian novel, and the deradicalization of the U.S. working class in order to still be vibrant today.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Watts's *Heroism and the Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics, and Afro-American Intellectual Life*.

<sup>2</sup> I refer here to Alain Badiou's theory of the *event*, which is described in his *Being and Event*. To put it briefly and without full justice to the complexity of Badiou's work, events are non-ontological (they have no essence, no content of their own) ruptures from ontology, aleatory instances that potentially induce

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various practices and procedures, including politics. Resonating with Althusser's theory of aleatory materialism described in my first chapter, Badiou's event can be thought of as an attempt to think an anti-originary materialism, or to situate chance and indeterminacy as determinants of practice. The spirit of the event concept is, in part, a refusal of theoretical models that delimit the possibility of an occurrence—say, the uprising in Egypt—by assigning it causation and necessary direction.

<sup>3</sup> See Benjamin's well-known 1940 essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History."

<sup>4</sup> The importance of the formal autonomy of the dozens is theorized by Lawrence Levine, who in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* describes the dozens as "a speech act with clearly understood governing principles." For Levine, the governing operation of the dozens is a "controlled counterpoint of ritualized insult" that "brings a temporary, a limited perfection" by virtue of its performative rules, internal structure, and highly disciplined practice. To abandon ritual insult for "personal insult"—to mistake creative practice as referential—is both to lose and to bring "anger, loss of control, and confusion" (348).

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