

## **A War of Juxtaposition: Abstraction, Narrative And The Common**

### **Introduction: A Missed Shot**

There are few novels that have had as large an effect on legislation as Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. The 1906 work captured the public's attention and brought scrutiny down upon the large meat packing companies, resulting in both the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. It is the most important work to come out of over half-a-century of tireless activism and struggle, yet to Sinclair, *The Jungle* would always remain a wasted opportunity. His famous lament, "I aimed for the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach," underscores the disappointment he felt in his self-described failure.

In Sinclair's mind, he had set out to write an *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for the urban proletariat, a novel that would change the political landscape. The devoted socialist intended *The Jungle* to awaken Americans to the underclasses and the marginalized within their own nation. He portrayed poor immigrants working under deplorable conditions for meager wages who were then cheated at every turn by a capitalist network of domination. The novel ends with the protagonist Jurgis Rudkus finding himself lost and alone after becoming disillusioned with the American dream and turning to socialist organizing: Sinclair's solution for the proletariat. But when the public read *The Jungle*, they were appalled at Sinclair's vivid descriptions of unsanitary meat packing plants. People panicked both at home and abroad at the revelation that their meat was so contaminated – albeit partly due to some of Sinclair's unsubstantiated depictions of workers being turned into lard.

Politicians and the meat packers themselves sprang into action when it became clear the public was not going to be willing to eat the meat they saw described in Sinclair's pages. But the legislation created in response to the novel passed on the cost of inspection to the public, forcing

Sinclair to oppose the bills he made possible. He saw his appeal as unsuccessful, claiming the public reacted to the book out of fear of polluted meat rather than due to genuine concern for workers.

One goal of this paper is to examine why *The Jungle* failed as a tool of the socialist cause. The crux of that failure was that readers took one story about an immigrant in Chicago and his horrific job as just that, rather than as a description of man crushed beneath the boots of capitalism's enforcers. Sinclair intended Jurgis as an everyman with whom all proletarians could identify, but instead the public focused on the specifics of the story in front of them, creating a gap between the character itself and its representative purpose. As we can see by Sinclair's statements about his intentions for *The Jungle*, his goal was not just to write the narrative of Jurgis and his relatives. Instead, his goal was to write a narrative of the American worker in 1905 told through what he saw as a representative example. His hope was that in Jurgis, Americans would see themselves and their neighbors, that their stories would be close enough to his that they could identify with his struggles instead of seeing the particularities of a fictional character.

In the coming pages, I offer a dialectical view of abstraction and narrative, paying close attention to the way the two are interrelated and inseparable. To do this, I rely heavily on a constellation of writers who share commonalities in thought. I do not attempt to bring the theorists upon which I rely into convergence, as their vocabularies and ideas differ considerably. Rather, I hope by juxtaposing certain elements of their work, their commonalities will become apparent to the reader in a manner which preserves their differences. I see the incompatibility between the thinkers who feature in the coming pages not as a difficulty or an inconvenience to be foot-noted away, but as Fredric Jameson puts it, “the space in which genuine philosophical innovation can take place.” (*Valences of The Dialectic* p. 284-285). I choose to start with Karl Marx not because so many of the other thinkers are so indebted to him – although they certainly are – but because the incompleteness of his work on dialectics and abstraction provides an open-ended starting point

conducive to further development.

I argue that Sinclair in *The Jungle* fails to establish the American proletariat as a social subject due to his reliance on the strategy of representation. Sinclair's misaimed shot is a lesson in the revolutionary potential in narratives and its relation to the process of abstraction. In teasing apart the relations between these terms, I attempt to provide some insight into the task of contemporary radicals to make present a social arrangement free of exploitation in a way that Sinclair never managed. Our task, however, is different than Sinclair's; changes in the contemporary arrangements of capital – what has been called the era of “post-Fordism” – produce different oppositional visions. I choose to look at some oppositional concepts (i.e. “the multitude,” “the common”) in terms of their abstract and narrative constructions in hopes such an investigation will reveal a place of action. The goal of this work then is not to create understanding, but to locate a point of intervention.

## **Marx and Abstraction**

To get an idea of the relationship between narrative and abstraction, I will investigate the constructions of abstractions in general before examining narratives and the relationship between these two concepts. Marx outlines his theory of abstraction in his *Introduction to the Critique of Political Philosophy*, one of his few writings on his dialectical method. Marx writes of Adam Smith's usage of the term “labor,” “The indifference as to the particular kind of labor implies the existence of a highly developed aggregate of different species of concrete labor, none of which is any longer the predominant one. So do the most general abstractions commonly arise only where there is the highest concrete development, where one feature appears to be jointly possessed by many, and to be common to all. Then it cannot be thought of any longer in one particular form.”

(19)

The first important point Marx makes in this passage is that abstractions – including abstracted narratives like that of the American worker in 1905 – are based in concretes. Jurgis's

story is a different type of narrative from that of the American worker of 1905. The first is a story in the conventional sense, dealing with one individual and a causal string of events stretched along a time sequence. Although it includes macroscopic issues like the status of immigrants in turn-of-the-century Chicago and the cleanliness of meat production, *The Jungle* is centered within one man and it tells his story. The narrative of the American worker at the turn of the century holds some things in common with Jurgis's – his story is, after all, part of both narratives. Unfair dealings with dissembling salesmen and cruel, arbitrary bosses is common to both, but the smell of the meat packing plants is only in the first. Although they were certainly many Americans who worked in meat packing, the vast majority did not. A family of workers picking grapes in California or coal miners in Appalachia might find few specifics with which to identify in *The Jungle*. The narrative of the American worker of 1905 (abstract) has fewer specifics than the narrative of Jurgis (concrete), because the abstraction is predicated on more than one example. The key to Sinclair's failure was a result of his attempt to get an abstract narrative about the American worker from a specific concrete narrative about an immigrant in Chicago. There is no “essence” of labor or the American worker, rather both abstract ideas originate in concrete representations or instances. All thought is based ultimately on material realities. This is a simple expression of Marx's materialist thought, although he will complicate it later with the notion of pre-existing abstractions.

Any idea of labor is tied directly to “different species of concrete labor.” Labor does not exist as a category in and of itself under which individual behaviors belong, but is rather a product of the juxtaposition of concrete instances or representations of certain events. Marx posits that labor does not exist without the actual laboring bodies of worker from which the larger abstraction finds its substance. Naturally, any story of the American worker in 1905 cannot exist without instances and/or representations of people living in America working during the year 1905.

## A Note on Concrete and Fictional Events

Until now, I've required the clumsy “instances and/or representations” language because either could by themselves constitute the material base for an abstract narrative. For instance, we could build an abstract narrative of working in corporate America by interviewing people who did and continue to labor under these conditions and looking for narrative characteristics that seem “jointly possessed by many, and to be common to all.” This abstract narrative would be defined only by concrete instances; all of the events upon which the narrative is based *occurred*. We engage in concrete narrative constructions whenever we describe commonalities in occurrences that happen around us. To put it in narrative theory terms, the base events for concrete narratives must happen on our diagetive level, the level of storytelling corresponding to our reality.

At the same time, it is possible to build a narrative solely on a basis of events on different diagetive levels, that is, based only on stories we tell of other worlds. Think about the typical situation-comedy. Sitcoms, which require fresh narratives every week, tend toward certain patterns. A common narrative example is the “butterfly effect” story. These are plots in which a protagonist goes back in time and alters something in the past before returning to the present to see the consequences. It is easy to see why this could be a compelling episode for viewers, they get to see the lives of the characters they have followed for months or years altered, with characters playing different possibilities of themselves. Whether in *The Simpsons* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, we recognize the general frame of the story because we have heard or seen enough fictional narratives of a similar structure.

This is then the other pole in the concrete-instance/fictional-representation spectrum. In the butterfly effect narrative, none of the events upon which it is based have occurred on the level of our reality. As far as verifiable general knowledge is concerned, no human has ever gone back in

time and changed something only to watch it affect the future. Those of us who have read enough science-fiction books and have seen enough syndicated television to develop a concept of the butterfly effect narrative compose it only from fabrications without a single concrete event.

The combination of the two presents another alternative. Mixed abstract narratives are constructed both of fictional representations and concrete instances. My conception of the narrative of the worker in corporate America is composed both from actual working bodies as well as Scott Adams's comic strip *Dilbert* and Mike Judge's movie *Office Space*. It's not surprising that fictional representations, which constitute such a large percentage of narratives we experience on a daily basis, would contribute to our abstract narratives. From here forth, I will use the term “concrete” to refer to both concrete instances and concrete representations unless otherwise specified.

## **Marx and Abstraction Continued**

Marx associates an abstraction's generality with its corresponding concrete basis's high development because the more an observer can draw upon in creating an abstraction, the more wide-ranging its scope. In creating the abstraction of a dog, one can draw upon all sorts of concrete examples belonging to all sorts of breeds from around the world. The picture of this dog is incredibly general, as it is limited to describing features “common to all” dogs.

It would be a mistake to see the abstraction as simply physical characteristics, as our abstraction of “dog” also contains behaviors. This is why the “dog alien” in David Fincher's 1992 film *Alien 3* is in any sense a “dog,” it shares some physical characteristics (four legs, tail) in common, but that would not differentiate it from a “cat alien” or “squirrel alien.” What makes it a “dog” alien is the way it moves (bounding and pacing in circles) as well as the way it growls and barks. A lot of animals have tails, but the practice of tail-wagging is part of what, in juxtaposition with other physical features and practices, defines a dog.

Take the urban legend of the old, blind woman who discovers to her horror that the animal

she has kept as a small dog had in fact been a large rat. There is something that makes this rat, at least in the old lady's cataract-ridden eyes, a dog. It plays the role of “dog” in her life, presumably acting enough like a Pomeranian, at least in the woman's presence, to escape detection. The rat would have eaten dog food and walked on a dog leash and done other “dog-like” things.

Insofar as abstractions like this include common patterns of action and behavior over a time-sequence, they are narrative. ~~In~~ By including behaviors, we have subjects acting through time and space. We do not have a simple estranged object, but a character. What I called a picture would be better described as a movie, but such a representative metaphor remains misleading. If I encourage the reader to imagine abstractions in visual forms, consider it provisional and subject to heavy scrutiny later. For now it suffices to pose the question: How could dog commonalities be visually represented without including aspects that are specific to only a portion of the concrete narrative base?

When it comes to earthly dogs, the abstraction of “pit bull” is less general than “dog” due to its less-developed concrete basis. There are fewer pit bulls and they have fewer differences between them than the members of the set of all dogs. The abstraction comes closer into focus. The more restricted the material basis (large pit bulls, large angry pit bulls, etc.), the less general the abstraction becomes, until it becomes completely equivalent to its material basis, as in the case of the large, angry pit bull that bit off Billy Jenkins's hand on the shore of Lake Michigan the summer of 1975. The story of Billy Jenkins and his bad day is a concrete narrative, it is not based upon any events beyond itself. When this ceases to be true, say in a new report about dog attacks in the Great Lakes region during the mid 70's (a phenomenon of which, for our purposes, Billy Jenkins was not the only victim), it becomes an abstract narrative. This abstract narrative is predicated upon a concrete basis wider than a single instance.

## Anticonfluent Literature As Abstract Narratives

### Stubborn Refusal

I toyed with a lot of different terms in trying to describe the narrative phenomenon I use in this section. Ultimately I needed a label that would describe a series of narratives but did not limit their ability to interact (as in a short-story collection) without blending into a singularity. Many ideas of narrative flowing from Aristotle's *Poetics* see narratives as necessarily connected through causality, which makes a lot of the traditional terms insufficient for our purposes. I decided on “anticonfluent” partly because of its provenance. It originates from David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* as the title of a fictional experimental film style. Wallace describes anticonfluentism in endnote 61 as, “An après-garde digital movement, a.k.a. 'Digital Parallelism' and 'Cinema of Chaotic Stasis,' characterized by a stubborn and possibly intentionally irritating refusal of different narrative lines to merge into any kind of meaningful confluence ... ” (1996) I find myself particularly attracted to the image of narrative lines, running parallel (as in 'Digital Parallelism') and refusing to converge. That is exactly what we have in the technique I analyze in the coming pages.

The word “parallel” has more than one component narratively even if those aspects are collapsible in geometry. The first characteristic of parallel lines is that they never intersect. This is the “anti” in the “anticonfluentism;” the narratives display “a stubborn and possibly intentionally irritating refusal of different narrative lines to merge into any kind of meaningful confluence.”(Ibid) Yet parallel lines share more than their lack of confluence in common. In order for two lines (at least in two dimensions) not to converge, they need to have the same slope. Although they work out to the same thing in geometry, convergence and shared slope are independently useful as narratological features. Although it might not have been the intention of Wallace's by now alter-



present film critics, anticonfluentism will require more than a simple lack of confluence.

Fredric Jameson cites this juxtaposed multiplicity of the postmodern as its principal advantage over modern literature in its ability to make Time appear, “Even within the most subjective reduction of temporal experience, the thing itself only becomes visible at moment of temporal coexistence, of simultaneity, of the contemporaneity without coalescence of several distinct subjectivities at once. [emphasis in original]” (*Valences of The Dialectic*, 531) It is in their juxtaposition without confluence that the multiplicities make present a common Time. Through an understanding of their commonalities and thus their differences, times describe a work's Time. The capitalized Time that Jameson writes of is not the only abstraction juxtaposed multiplicities within a text can produce in this manner. In the works I will examine in this section, parallel narrative threads produce a Narrative. Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva distinguishes between *story lines* and *testimonies*, with the former describing “*socially shared tales that are fable-like and incorporate a common scheme and wording* [emphasis in original]” and the later, first-person accounts. (76) *Story lines* are abstract narratives, not describing one instance, but a multiplicity of instances linked through commonalities, whereas testimonies are the concrete stories of individuals. The structure of anticonfluent literature can provide insight into the relationship between these two concepts, since it relies on their interplay. If anticonfluent works are narrative as wholes, then their *story lines* are products of commonalities within *testimonies* (here not only as first-person, but any kind of concrete accounts). What those commonalities are and how they can be described constitutes a bigger problem, but the presence of commonalities is readily apparent in anticonfluent works. Authors who use this technique create material bases for narrative abstraction and through the commonalities, the parallel narratives define an abstract narrative.

## **The Limits of Written Abstraction**

Why then would multiplicity be so helpful the construction of abstract narratives? The

fundamental function of abstraction is to describe larger commonalities across a material basis. In maintaining a multiplicity, anticonfluent works do not have one life stand for many, but have some serve as a description of the commonalities of a larger group. Surely no single abstract narrative in print-form could contain its complete material basis, especially since new events happen every day and the material basis is constantly shifting. We must recognize the authors' limitations in using abstraction in this way; each writer is situated in a certain time and place, leaving them with access only to particular limited abstract conceptions. Before looking at the first work, Boyle's short story, I want to touch briefly on the ways time and the revelation of historically repressed subjectivities have a constant shifting effect on any transhistorical narrative.

As a classic example of a transhistorical narrative, take the evolution of the abstract narrative of the American family. In the 1950's, the abstraction might look something like the Cleavers of *Leave It to Beaver*: a white, heterosexual, upper-middle class nuclear family that faces a series of certain challenges – mostly related to the instruction of misbehaving children. In many ways, half-a-century later we are stuck with the same abstraction, but there are signs of change. Over time, the material basis of families shifts with the dominant subjectivity and we can imagine a future in which the abstraction of “American family” is not heteronormative. With the normalization of gay and lesbian marriage, the abstraction will change. But gays did not suddenly appear when mainstream society acknowledged them. Although there is a good case to be made that the identification does not exist until it is named, there were people throughout history engaging in patterns of action that contemporary commentators label “homosexual.” With the creation of new categorizations and labeled abstractions of individual behavior, we revise the ways in which we view history and negate earlier conceptions. When contemporary writers refer to Oscar Wilde as “gay,” they change our knowledge of history by applying contemporary abstractions anachronistically. Think about the abstract category “ancient civilizations,” over time this will change as “ancient” comes to mean different things. In some possible futures, present-day American

civilization could qualify as ancient, or could not qualify as a civilization at all. At the same time, the current conception of “ancient civilization” in America has changed with more research into pre-colonial African and American civilizations and a decline in kinds of socially tolerated overt racism. The second part might be more important since it is the revelation of the African subjectivity within the dominant subjectivity that enables this expansion of the category. Jameson describes the revolutionary process in similar terms, as when “repressed popular groups slowly emerge from the silence of their subalterity and dare to speak out.” (*Valences*, 391) Revolution is a productive process and this societal shift changes our conceptions of our *story lines*.

In a possible future of animal liberation, we could imagine a renewed look at the role of pets in constituting the “American family.” Future cultural critics and historians could very well characterize those of us who eat meat, use animal products and keep pets as the moral equivalents of slave-owners. Although the idea of squirrels at the ballot box will strike most readers as ridiculous, history suggests that what seems absurd now could be a real-world consequence of the revelation of historically repressed animal subjectivities<sup>1</sup>. We can imagine a world in which not only are dogs people too, they will have always been people. And yet an author writing about animals today – at least one not associated with the animal liberation movement – may be unable to predict the effects that the unearthed subjectivities of her fellow creatures will have on our current abstractions.

Along these lines, Jameson describes Derrida's notion of supplementarity “in which, following Jakobson's notion of the synchronic, a new moment in the system comes complete with its own brand-new past and (as in Husserl) reorders our perception around itself as center (whose permanence is then projected back endlessly into time).” (*Valences*, 288) What is important is to view this process of unearthing as negation, that which attempts to reimagine history through

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1. I use the example of enfranchised squirrels precisely *because* it sounds so absurd. More common imaginings of future emergent subjectivities like robots (Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*) or clones (David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*) are compelling because they are not so far-fetched that they can invoke human sympathy. To get at the true conceptual violence caused by emergent subjectivities, we require an example that seems easy to dismiss out of hand. It is this simple reaction that should provoke a sharper barb of doubt.

different abstractions; as if the discovery of bones belonging to a previously unknown ancestor were to change what we mean by “human<sup>2</sup>.”

This description is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the process whereby abstractions change, and I delve into it in a later section. For now it suffices to explain how authors are limited by their material situations. Whatever abstract narrative the authors construct is situated within the author's conceptions of certain abstractions, which we know will be subject to future and retroactive revision. What the author can do is relate a (disconnected) series of events that, through their juxtaposition, describe an observed commonality across time and space, revealing social phenomena as such. At this point, I think it would behoove me to dispense with any further introduction and move to the first text.

### **T.C. Boyle's Handful of Dust**

T.C. Boyle starts his 1977 story “The Extinction Tales” with an epigraph from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. He writes, “I will show you fear in a handful dust,” and that is what Boyle does. The story comes in at five pages, but it contains seven distinct narrative elements. The story is anticonfluent in that these components are non-intersecting yet share important commonalities. If my analysis of Boyle's story seems exhausting as well as exhaustive, it is because I hope a close-reading of his production of an abstract narrative will yield important questions about abstraction as well as a grounding analysis of an anticonfluent work.

Boyle's title serves as a fair characterization, but the singular version would be just as descriptive of the story contained. “Tales” implies a series of independent, if not anticonfluent, stories and there is a certain amount of humor and form-breaking in referring to a five-page short story as a series of “Tales.” We could read the seven narrative elements as separate pieces of micro-fiction, in effect seeing “The Extinction Tales” as seven works instead of one. However, “The

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<sup>2</sup> Or, even better, if an evolutionary divergent race of humanoids were to emerge and through their assertion of their own existence, negate our abstraction of ourselves.

Extinction Tales” is itself a short-story and, due to its structure, it does not seem a stretch to read it as a single indivisible story. Thus, “The Extinction Tales” is also a singular “Extinction Tale.”

I call the individual parts of Boyle's story “elements” or “components” instead of simply “narratives” because some of them straddle the line between narrative and fact. The second component is in its entirety, “In 1945, when the Russians liberated Auschwitz, they found 129 ovens in the crematorium. The ovens were six feet long, two feet high, one and a half feet wide.” (425). This is a weighty pair of sentences to be sure, but we can easily imagine it showing up as a historical fact in a particularly morbid modern history book. There is an implied narrative insofar as the paragraph gives the reader a series of events during which the Russian soldiers liberate Auschwitz and then find the ovens, all during 1945. Yet this is not the way Boyle phrases the sentences, the liberation and the soldiers are the context for the discovery of the ovens' dimensions. I do ultimately contend that each element is itself narrative, but making clear the distinction here does not hide what I see as an important question.

The T.S. Eliot epigraph is important in framing the rest of the story. It is to some degree Boyle's statement of purpose; the narrative components are dust in Boyle's hand, pointing to unavoidable entropy for all living things. Dust has an element of transhistorical commonality to it; it has always existed and, unlike everything else, it will always exist. Whereas we describe the result of a particular act of destruction as ashes (e.g. a body after it has been cremated, a house after it has been burned), dust builds up over time as the amalgamation of countless tragedies and inevitabilities. Dust points past death to doom. The fear which Eliot writes and Boyle invokes is not just a fear of personal or individual death, but death on a “sublime” scale. That fear is the fear of extinction, a proper subject for a story titled “The Extinction Tales.”

Yet we know that to view the title as a category into which Boyle placed the narrative elements is to ignore the work we have done so far and to think profoundly undialectically. If we think of the title “The Extinction Tales” as descriptive, – referring directly to the content of the story

– then it is an abstraction from the concrete instances in the story. There can be no “Extinction Tales” before there are tales of extinction. Extinction is an abstract narrative in that it describes a commonality among separate events, and “The Extinction Tales” is its anticonfluent construction. In this sub-section, I look at Boyle's modeling of extinction as an abstract narrative or *story line* as a concrete instance of anticonfluent production. What do the elements share in common and how does the author make this evident? How does he negotiate particularities and broader commonalities?

The first element ( $E_1$ ) in the story is about an unnamed man who takes a job as a lighthousekeeper on Stephen Island in Wellington, New Zealand. Boyle gives the reader no specific historical time for the element. The man brings a cat to the isolating job and the cat brings him a dead wren the bird-watching lighthousekeeper has never seen before. He gets it authenticated as a new species by the national museum without ever seeing one alive. The last line is haunting in the understated way that is characteristic of Boyle's work, “After a while the cat stopped bringing them.” (424) As the first element in an anticonfluent series, this element takes on an ambiguous significance; it stands as the first step into a work without a center. It would be easy to read some sort of chronological order into Boyle's story and see each element as building upon the ones behind it. I spend more time later in the section on how Boyle's story defies formalist chronologies, but in terms of how the elements are linked, it is important not to ascribe undue importance to the first story-within-the-story.

In fact, the first element by itself is manifestly incomplete. The “meaning” of the story is revealed through the other elements. After reading only  $E_1$ , the reader cannot establish what are commonalities integral to the construction of the abstract narrative and what are peculiar specificities that only appear in one or few elements. The reader does not know if the abstract narrative will be about extinction in the South Pacific, waning biodiversity among ocean life or creatures' destructive and predatory relationships with each other. This is ambiguous precisely

because there is nothing as yet with which to compare  $E_1$ . We do not yet have a sufficient concrete basis to begin the process of abstraction, even if we have hints in the title and epigraph as to what that abstraction might describe. Every element before the last – although the idea that the last is complete will certainly bear scrutiny – is incomplete, yet to have access to the full material basis of which they are parts.

$E_2$  is the two sentences about the liberation of Auschwitz that I cited earlier, “In 1945, when the Russians liberated Auschwitz, they found 129 ovens in the crematorium. The ovens were six feet long, two feet high, one and a half feet wide.”(425) In this second element, the reader does get a historical event, but no clue as to its relation to the first chronologically. Instead of the presumably achieved extinction that happens off the page in  $E_1$ ,  $E_2$  refers to a well-known human attempt at extermination. With these two elements, commonalities remain nebulous. Extinction now includes more than the natural processes of life, the abstraction includes genocide in addition to the disappearance of the Stephen Island wren.

The third element is the longest in the story at around two pages. It is the story of Jared Pink who sets up a butcher shop in the booming city of Chicago around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (I trust my reader to question what is meant by “booming” considering what we have regarding the same time and place from Sinclair). The bulk of the story is devoted to Pink and his brother innovating new ways to kill large numbers of highly profitable passenger pigeons. Pink's story ends with him as rich investor, having climbed the ladder on the carcasses of countless pigeons. But that is not how Boyle ends the element. Instead, the focus shifts from the bootstraps narrative and settles on the part of  $E_3$  directly related to story's second-level abstraction. Boyle writes, “On a September afternoon in 1914, when Jared Pink was seventy-two, a group of ornithologists was gathered around a cage at the Cincinnati zoo. Inside the cage was a passenger pigeon named Martha, and she was dying of old age. The bird gripped the wire mesh with her beak and stiffened. She was the last of her kind on earth.” (427) Now the reader has two bird elements ( $E_1$  and  $E_3$ ) and one human element.

The reader would not be remiss in wondering if the author is comparing birds to people with this juxtaposition. At this point in the story, the concrete basis of the abstraction is created entirely out of birds and people, all three fit into the combined set. Is this a lasting commonality? The abstract narratives composed of elements  $E_{1-3}$  might look something like: “Humanity and bird species are both subject to complete eradication at the hands of men – whether it be through disinterest, cruelty or an unstoppable drive for profit<sup>3</sup>.” But these commonalities are provisional from one paragraph to the next.

$E_4$  is of a different character than the elements before it. The fourth element would not be out of place in a biology textbook: “The variola virus, which causes smallpox, cannot exist outside the human body. It is now, as the result of pandemic immunization, on the verge of extinction.” (Ibid.) The second and final paragraph of  $E_4$  is a list of animals that have disappeared “this” century (presumably the twentieth as it was the century in which smallpox was virtually eradicated). The list includes some birds, but also a variety of different animal species.  $E_4$  then destabilizes the abstraction of elements  $E_{1-3}$ . The reader feels no remorse about the eradication of smallpox, taking away from the pathos established in the first three elements. The dry technical tone (“Numerous other lifeforms have disappeared in this century...”) of  $E_4$  combined with the tension between desirable and undesirable extinction leads this element to a morally neutral view of extinction. This shifts not only the commonalities (expanding past birds and people) but the tone of the abstraction. The abstract narrative no longer contains an uncomplicated environmentalist/humanitarian attitude toward extinction that sees it as something regrettable if not abhorrent. In  $E_4$ , extinction is something that occurs distinct from morality.

Next is the story of missionary George Robertson and his work in Tasmania. In  $E_5$ , Boyle gives the reader a definite time and place: Tasmania in 1835. Robertson's job is to “save the aboriginal Tasmanians from extinction and perdition both.” (Ibid.) After spending four years in the

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<sup>3</sup> The first element does not make explicit reference to man's role in the extinction of the Stephen Island Wren, but juxtaposed with the second and third, man's (in)actions move to the forefront of a narrative in which they might not otherwise.



bush looking for remnants of the indigenous population, Robertson returns to the town with 187 aboriginal converts. These few survivors proceed to die rapidly and by the mid-eighteen-sixties, the last indigenous Tasmanian dies. The element concludes with Robertson resigning from the clergy. E<sub>5</sub> seems to fit nicely with the first three elements, it would certainly not be the first time an author has compared colonial genocide to the Shoah. But the three qualities that lead to extinction within the first three elements (disinterest, cruelty, an unstoppable drive for profit) do not fit with Robertson's good though gravely ignorant intentions. E<sub>5</sub> contains a seeming inevitability – the aboriginals were destined to die out whether Robertson arrived or not. Although their extinction is only guaranteed in the context of colonialism and exploitation, both human causes, the element's central character is stuck within a hopeless situation. This inevitability, as phrased in Boyle's aped religious/colonial discourse, seems more in line with E<sub>4</sub> than with the first three elements.

The sixth element continues the scientific detached tone Boyle first uses in E<sub>4</sub>. E<sub>6</sub> contains two paragraphs. The first is a list of the number of higher primates left on earth, “25,000 chimpanzees, 5,000 gorillas, 3,000 orangutans, and 4,000,000,000 men.” (428) The second describes what is left of the dodo, “a foot in the British museum, a head in Copenhagen, and a quantity of dust.” (Ibid.) Although the list of surviving primates is told in the sterile discourse of scientific truth, the vast discrepancies between the numbers tells a story of humanity and its effect on other species. Putting E<sub>6</sub> and E<sub>4</sub> in conversation yields a commonality between the two concerning man. Despite the things being eradicated having different qualities, they are made extinct by people. Man is an agent of extinction, whether it be said to be for good or ill, the destruction is common to both scenarios.

E<sub>7</sub> is the most complicated element as well as the final one. Unlike in the previous narrative elements, Boyle uses a first-person narrator. The first paragraph (of three) has important implications for the abstraction so I repeat it here in its entirety, “Suns fade, and planets wither. Solar systems collapse When the Sun reaches its red-giant stage in five billion years it will flare up

to sear the earth, ignite it like a torch held to a scrap of newsprint, the seas evaporated, the forests turned to ash, the ragged Himalayan peaks fused and then converted to dust, cosmic dust. What's a species here, a species there? This is where extinction becomes sublime.” (429) Here is the full articulation of the natural hopelessness in E<sub>4</sub> and E<sub>5</sub>. With the earth destined to be enveloped in fire, everything living is already on the path to extinction.

The last two paragraphs are the story of the narrator – implied to be Boyle himself – visiting his father's grave for the first time. Boyle ends the story thus, “Then I found it. My father's name in a spot of light. I regarded the name: a three-part name, identical to my own. The light held, snowflakes creeping through the beam like motes of dust. I extinguished the light.” (Ibid.) The sight of his (although the gender of the narrator is not made explicit, I do not think it is a stretch to say that a child with the same name as its father would most likely share his gender) name on a tombstone is a *memento mori* for the narrator who need not imagine what his grave will look like, it sits in front of him. We have within E<sub>7</sub> both the most general (“Solar systems collapse”) and the most specific and personal (“Listen: when my father died I did not attend the funeral”) brushes with extinction. The final element in this series does vital work in defining the scope of the abstract narrative as including massive scientific facts as well as personal brushes with the idea of one's own mortality.

I chose to examine the Boyle story first for a number of reasons, but an important one is that his title gives the reader a shortcut in defining the commonalities between the elements; Boyle tells us from the beginning that the “tales” are related to the idea of “extinction.” Naming commonalities is incredibly difficult because of the multiplicity within the concrete determinants. We could imagine, in the absence of the story's title, arguing about what to call the commonalities, though I think Boyle makes it clear the stories relate through extinction. The question in interpreting “The Extinction Tales” then shifts from “What are the commonalities among the elements?” to “How does Boyle define the term 'extinction' within its narrative elements?” Although they are

substantially the same question, phrasing it the second way gives us something to look for.

Before I attempt to determine how Boyle constructs extinction, I want to look quickly at anticonfluentiality within the text. Within the seven elements, there are a variety of times and places (although skewed toward the modern ages and the South Pacific) placed in no sort of chronological order. The elements are all distinct and dialectically share/construct a common narrative pattern. The lack of a chronological coherence gives the story a transhistorical character. It goes from the nineteenth century to the twentieth to billions of years in the future and finds commonalities in each place. This (lack of) organization complicates formalist notions of chronology within narratives. Formalist narratology contains both *fabula* (story) and *sjuzhet* (plot), the first being arranged based on a chronology of events and the second being the events in the order of which they are narrated. Woe to the critic who searches for the *fabula* within “The Extinction Tales.” Most of the events dictated have times assigned, but does  $E_1$  come before or after  $E_2$  when it comes to the “story?” Since the elements are not connected by cause-effect relationships, an analysis of the story's *fabula* would not be worth much. It is not necessary to make sense of the elements by how they relate to each other in time, rather they acquire significance through the commonalities they construct/share. In the next section, I will suggest a non-chronological method of examining elements' placement that may better serve anticonfluential literature than the old formalist tools.

With the story's disconnected chronology, Boyle establishes extinction as something that happens regardless of place or time. It is transnational and transhistorical. In this way, differences matter as much as commonalities. In having his stories located in different places, Boyle is writing that place is not a commonality when it comes to the concrete basis of abstract extinction. He establishes the negative “not place” as a commonality among the elements and therefore an aspect of extinction: disregard for location. Construction works essentially the same way for commonalities as for uncommonalities. If we take “living things” to be an important commonality in all of Boyle's elements – and it is one – we see that if it is something shared across the material

basis, it becomes a part of the abstraction. Extinction is a process whereby living things die.

Another uncommonality is human intention. When it occurs in an element, it is never the same as in others. We do not have a series of would-be saints, nor do we have a series of parables about butchers – although the story does have one of the first and at least two of the second. In the face of such a multiplicity of human intention with no change in conclusion between elements, “not human intention” then becomes a common quality and one that belongs to the abstraction, which we could now write roughly as, “All living things become extinct despite the intentions of men.”

But is man inconsequential in “The Extinction Tales?” It seems to this reader that anthropogenic extinction is too prevalent across the elements to ignore. Even if human intention does not change the existence of extinction, human action and existence certainly do. Boyle portrays man as an active part in extinction, whether it is through hunting birds, converting aboriginals, persecuting Jews, destroying smallpox or crowding out other primates. Extinction on earth is tied inextricably in Boyle's narrative to the planet's dominant inhabitants. Yet although man<sup>4</sup> destroys, Boyle does not let the reader think he will become something other than dust. In *E<sub>7</sub>* specifically, Boyle acknowledges that not only will all things (including man) alive on earth die within the next five billion years, but that men need not look further than the graves of our fathers for evidence that we too will be dust. The narrative Boyle constructs then looks something like, “All living things, no matter where and when, will eventually turn to dust. Man is an agent of extinction, but he too will not escape it.” Look at the role anticonfluentuality plays in that narrative, is there a way to construct something so specifically abstract through a concrete narrative? Boyle's story is haunting because the reader knows it applies to her/him as well as everything living that s/he knows. The scope of the narrative is what makes it so powerful, and the anticonfluent construction is what defines the scope.

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4 N.B. that I use the male pronoun here intentionally. Boyle describes not just a human role in extinction, but a gendered male role.

## What Kind of Blue?

To this point I have written about the concrete basis within an abstraction as having something in common, as sharing what I called a slope or narrative pattern. In this section, I pull apart the process by which we establish those commonalities and call into question the idea that the elements necessarily share commonalities at all. Take *The Extinction Tales*, all the elements include death of some sort or another, but what makes them a set besides their inclusion in the story? Is there an essence to which the elements must adhere?

To get to the answers to these questions, it might be easier to look at more quotidian abstractions – at least for those not morbidly obsessed with their future deaths. Since Wittgenstein, on whom I rely heavily in these pages, looks at colors, we will look at colors<sup>5</sup>. He writes, “Suppose I show someone [Let's call him J.J.] various multi-colored pictures and say: 'The color you see in all these is called 'yellow ochre'. – This is a definition, and [J.J.] will get to understand it by looking for and seeing what is common to the picture. Then [J.J.] can look *at*, can point *to*, the common thing ... And compare this case: I show him samples of different shades of blue and say: 'The color that is common to all of these is what I call 'blue''. (34) Wittgenstein's genius is manifest in his choice of examples, color is an excellent abstraction to analyze because everyone knows what blue is but no one can define it without recourse to wave measurements that have little to do with its social construction. In the first case, we see how yellow ochre is defined through its presence in multiple pictures, it being the only color common to all the cards. The abstraction of the color is a product of the various concrete bases – the cards containing instances of ochre. What J.J. learns is that regardless of its context, the commonality has a name.

Wittgenstein asks us to imagine what would happen if a color were defined separate from

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5 It has been suggested to me that color, especially the color blue, makes for a bad model because some cognitive neuroscience research indicates that there is brain architecture evolutionarily coded for certain shades. If blue exists at the neural level similarly in (most) humans, then it loses its abstract quality since the term would have a specific referent. However, whether or not this is true, color remains an excellent *model* for understanding the operation of abstraction as long as we ignore a possible absolute referent. In the quest for understanding, one can take a few liberties with the “truth.”

others, in different shades of blue. He does not answer his own question, but we can imagine J.J. changing his answer based on his knowledge of the category of color. If he does not know what is called “blue,” are we to assume that he has no knowledge of color? If so, asking him to understand the color that cards in shades of blue share in common would be tortuous and cruel. “Color,” in addition to colors, is an abstraction. Without access to other colors, how can J.J. know the commonality between the blue cards is in their pigment? The categorization of color is not possible without different instances of different colors. The abstraction of blue is dependent on its concrete basis, as is “color” defined by instances of color. Try describing “color” without using colors, it is difficult not to sound like a lunatic or a neuroscientist.

G.W.F. Hegel uses the example of color and adds the idea of negation to Wittgenstein's juxtaposition. He writes, “White is white only in opposition to black, and so on, and the Thing is a One precisely by being opposed to others.” (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, 72). In Hegel's formulation, the differentiation by juxtaposition takes a negative form<sup>6</sup>. Hegel here answers the question of the card of blues: Like white, blue is blue only in opposition to another color.

Colors are defined then, by their relations to each other. The search for an essence to a color will always be fruitless. Wittgenstein writes, “What shade is the 'sample in my mind' of the color green – the sample of what is common to all shades of green?

'But might there not be such 'general' samples? Say a schematic leaf, or a sample of *pure* green?’

Certainly there might. But for such a schema to be understood as a *schema*, and not as the shape of a particular leaf, and for a slip of pure green to be understood as sample of all that is greenish and not as a sample of pure green – this in turn resides in the way samples are used.” (35) This is

Sinclair's dilemma, the abstraction of the general from the concrete specific. If a “pure” sample of green is to stand for all things greenish, then Sinclair was searching for the pure American

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6 A Hegelian might here complain that the use of the term “juxtaposition” is unnecessary when “negation” is more specific and does the same conceptual work. While I will use the language of negation from time to time, I believe that juxtaposition is more useful in talking about the interaction of multiple elements within an abstraction, as in anticonfluent literature. Of course the elements define themselves through negation, but they form commonalities as well, according to their juxtaposed relations.

proletarian. Here Wittgenstein allows for the possibility of a pure sample, but does not allot it abstractive capacity on its own. In order for green to be understood abstractly, one instance is insufficient.

But if we have seven elements that construct an abstraction as in Boyle's story, is not any one of those elements a story of extinction? Isn't a single slip of green paper still green? Wittgenstein answers in the interrogative, "Ask yourself: what *shape* must the sample of the color green be? Should it be rectangular? Or would it then be the sample of a green rectangle? – So should it be 'irregular' in shape? And what is to prevent us then from regarding it – that is, from using it – only as a sample of irregularity of shape?" (Ibid.) It is this final question that chastises the hapless Sinclair, *The Jungle* was taken only as a sample of irregularity of shape. The relationship between instance and abstraction is stretched to its limit right after Wittgenstein allows for "pure" green. His answer to the imagined interlocutor in this question of a pure example deserves a lot of scrutiny.

After asking himself whether there could exist schematic instances, Wittgenstein replies, "Certainly there might." Despite the playful quality (because of it?) we ought not disregard his "definitely maybe" answer. In the mind of the (imagined) questioner, pure green or a schematic leaf either exist or do not, their meanings are internal. Wittgenstein tactfully sidesteps the question and concedes that these instances certainly *could* exist, but what does the existence of the schematic instances depend on? Under what circumstances do pure objects exist?

## **Kenneth Burke's Photograph**

This question has profound implications for representation, which is tied both to Sinclair's failure and to dominant forms of democratic organization (representational democracy).

Wittgenstein has demolished the idea of an ideal purity; on what unstable ground can we now build representations? In his *Rhetoric of Grammar*, Kenneth Burke uses terminology similar to

Wittgenstein's; Burke describes the act of creation as a “pure” act, insofar as it is “an act so thoroughly an act that it could be considered the form or prototype of all acts” and “the paradigm of action in general.” (61) Yet when he reaches for an example he falters, calling forth the image of a composite photograph which Burke admits “is not quite satisfactory, however, since a concept of 'the Creation,' as the prototype of action designates not the 'average' act, but the logical conclusion of the concept of action (an opponent might rather call it the *reductio ad absurdum* of the concept of action.)” (63) A composite photograph is a bad example of a “pure” portrait; just as a card of different shades of green would not be pure green, many photographs spliced together cannot be a pure instance. What could a pure portrait be?

If we trust in the power of the market, we know what some “pure” portraits looks like, they are the ones that come pre-packaged in the frames before they are discarded to be replaced with snapshots of children or pets. The marketing departments at the major frame manufacturers know that the purer they can get the sample picture, the more customers will see the possibility of their photos in the frame. The purer the photo, the more people get the message that the frame is for photos like theirs. Composite photos of the kind Burke suggests would tell customers that the frame is for lovers of modern art and could severely constrict the product's appeal. But experience tell us that these sample pictures too often contain beautiful and ostentatiously loving white heterosexual couples – as do the ranks of Western political representatives – or wide-eyed white infants of indeterminate gender. Only a very few families actually look like the ones smiling in the frames for sale.

We know that no pure portrait can exist if by “pure” we mean representing only commonalities within the concrete basis of the abstraction. Above, I invited the reader to imagine a “pure” dog in this manner, with the result that no such archetype was possible. Wittgenstein is fully aware of this when he asks what shape pure green ought to be, but still he joyously answers certainly maybe to the existence of pure instances.



How would one even ask for an instance of pure green? If we were to borrow Wittgenstein's test subject J.J. and ask him to show us pure green, he would be quite confused, and rightly so. We, or our innovative research assistants, would then design scenarios that could put him in a position to at least answer the question, even if we doubt the answer. The researchers could take J.J. on a walk and ask him to point out the pure green among a mass of plants or hand him a color spectrum and ask him to point at the shade when the green is most pure.

In all of these situations, in order to perform the experiment, we require juxtaposition in order to discuss the abstraction and what its pure instance could be. J.J. can select an instance of pure green or a schematic leaf, but the idea that a certain abstraction could contain a pure instance of itself requires the construction of that abstraction which requires a material basis. We can only know what is meant by "ochre" when its instances are juxtaposed as in the case of the multicolored cards. The reason the different shades of blue cannot define blue on their own is that the abstraction "color" must be defined through the juxtaposition of instances of colors. Juxtaposition is what allows the selection of pure samples. Burke is headed in the right direction with the composite photograph in that he recognizes the importance of defining an abstraction's scope, but he forgets that a pure portrait must also be a portrait. Including a composite portrait in the category of "portrait" expands the abstraction in a way that is both artistically compelling and needlessly complicating for our purposes.

If J.J. on one of his presumably frequent excursions with Wittgenstein selected a leaf and declared it a "schematic" leaf, or if he chose a certain shade of green on a spectrum as "pure" green, we could hardly imagine the professor asking instead for the *objective* schematic leaf or pure color. If we have established that no single instance can contain the full commonalities characterized by an abstraction, then any "schematic" or "pure" instance necessarily requires reduction and is not fully representative of a material basis but is instead reflective of a certain view of the world, a particular subjectivity. In the same way that Jameson's Time is a product of juxtaposed subjective

times, purity is a product of different ideas of purity held in relation to each other.

I am tasked now with defining “pure” in a way that will be useful in the coming pages. Both Wittgenstein and Burke use the term despite being aware of its problems. To ignore supposedly representative examples would be a serious mistake and though a term like “schematic” might carry less connotative baggage, there is a compelling weight to “pure,” which I will henceforth use without the quotations. When a child sees a chart of the colors and their names on the classroom wall, is not the green s/he sees pure? If asked to select the purest or most portrait-like portrait, would most people pick a snapshot of their neighbors or a pre-packaged model picture? I would go so far as to say that the leaves falling in the background of the mass-produced pure portrait are schematic. Purity is all around us.

We are then left with a functional definition of purity. When selecting something that cannot exist – an instance that accurately represents an abstraction – what do people choose? Purity will not be an exclusive property since it does not function this way. Imagine J.J. brings his friend Bob and each is given a card with various shades of green, one of them skewing toward dark green and the other one light but both of the cards overlapping significantly. If we asked them each to point to the pure green, they may not agree on the shade. If J.J. and Rob disagree about which green is pure green, it would be hard to imagine them fighting about it. In such a clearly subjective situation with no real stakes, the question of pure examples sounds simply academic and philosophical. At this point I think it is reasonable to leave the questions of colors behind and enter a more contentious world of purity in order to more usefully apply the framework and witness its political and ideological implications.

## **The Presidential Candidate**

One question that inevitably makes its way into polls after presidential debates is which candidate seemed more “presidential.” No more explanation is given as to what the quality

“presidentialness” entails, but respondents seem to be aware enough of the term's referent to answer. This illusory quality consultants make millions developing has the power to elevate aspirants – some of them severely under-qualified from a historical perspective – into the highest office in the United States, yet its meaning seems to shake down to something like “the most president-ish.” There are some presidents many Americans would probably agree are presidential (e.g. Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln) regardless of political affiliation, but the question of which candidate in any given election would serve as the purer instance is fraught with conflict.

When Americans respond to the question of presidentiality, what are they saying about the candidate? Consider William Kristol's ill-advised column “A Presidential McCain” published in *The Weekly Standard* in September of 2008. In the piece, Kristol argues that then-candidate John McCain's decision to leave the campaign trail to return to Washington and broker a deal on a bill to bail-out the financial sector – later revealed to be a major strategic error and one of the final nails in the coffin of his candidacy – would reveal him as the more presidential candidate. Kristol writes, “If candidate McCain, for whatever mixed motives, ends up acting in a way that results in a deal that is viewed as better than the original proposal, and that seems to stabilize the markets and avert a meltdown – he'll benefit politically, and he deserves to. For McCain will have acted 'presidentially' in the campaign – which some voters, quite reasonably, will think speaks to his qualifications to be president.” Leaving the campaign trail to try to broker a legislative deal is not something presidents do a whole lot, so “presidential” must mean something other than acting like presidents have tended to act in the past. Rather, voters see embodied in a candidate the qualities that they associate with the abstraction of the presidency. For Kristol, those virtues appear to be decisiveness and a willingness to act in the national interest regardless of convention. Asking which candidate is more presidential is not the same as asking which candidate would be a better president; the former asks the surveyed to juxtapose a candidate's actions and attributes against those of (imagined) past presidents.

With the exception of some anarchists and fringe libertarians, Americans have a positive enough regard for the abstraction that candidates actively seek to make themselves appear presidential<sup>7</sup>. Some voters seem to be willing to concede that the other side's candidate seems more presidential and independents must vary their answers based on candidate performance, otherwise there would be no point in asking the question. The point I am trying to get at is that the idea of what is “presidential” has cross-partisan resonance, people's ideas of a -pure president go beyond simple party affiliations. How, then, do we get our ideas of what qualities are presidential?

## **Benjamin's Sky**

A good model to think about abstractions is Walter Benjamin's idea of the constellation, “[A] juxtaposed rather than integrated cluster of changing elements that resist reduction to a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principle.” (Jay, 15) Stars and constellations share a dialectical relationship in that they are mutually creative. The (juxtaposed) individual stars make up and determine the constellation but at the same time the spoon of the Big Dipper defines the stars (e.g. “Alkaid is the one at the end of the handle.”) Instances and abstractions have a similar relationship in that the (juxtaposed) individual instances are the basis for an abstraction, but the abstraction defines which instances will fall under it and will thus be described in terms of the abstraction. Imagine each star is an instance of presidentiality, although not necessarily a former president. In truth, I would wager that the brightest stars in this imagined constellation would not be former presidents. Actors Martin Sheen and Dennis Haysbert, of *West Wing* and *24* respectively, hang much brighter in many Americans' constellations (including my own) than Zachary Taylor or Warren Harding. Candidates too can be presidential, with Robert Kennedy, Adlai Stevenson and Barry Goldwater being pure samples to some elderly voters.

The analogy only gets us so far and to make it work we must imagine a heavens unlike our own. When viewing the presidential constellation, each individual sees different stars of instance

<sup>7</sup> N.B. that no congressional poll I'm aware of has ever asked which candidate seems more “congressional.”

and with varying degrees of brightness. I would venture to say George Washington is a bright star in most Americans' presidential constellations, as is Lincoln. A Millard Fillmore hagiographer might see a giant galaxy orbiting our 13<sup>th</sup> president. On the other hand, a middle-aged person with no recollection of social studies classes who watches a lot of television movies might have a sparse sky with Michael Douglas, Kevin Kline, Jeff Bridges and Harrison Ford shining from on high. But because the relationship is dialectical, we do not see the individual instances on their own, but in terms of the larger constellation. The discussion of to what degree a candidate is presidential is an example of seeing an instance in terms of the abstraction, as is a reviewer questioning how “presidential” an actor's performance was.

So what do we see when we look at the presidential constellation? What commonalities shine through? The instances' commonalities are irreducible, yet we see a picture based on their juxtaposition. Different subjectivities produce different constellations; it is as if everyone looked at the Big Dipper and saw something different. Kristol sees action, others see contemplation and deliberation. Presidentiality is not just a function of relevant qualities (intelligence, charisma, net worth), but juxtaposed commonalities. For more Americans than would likely admit it, whiteness is a strongly juxtaposed commonality when it comes to what it means to be presidential.

Upon close examination, the pure instance of the presidential *does* look a lot like Jeff Bridges in *The Contender* or Harrison Ford in *Air Force One*. These are strong, resourceful and stoic white men of indeterminate-yet-distinguished age. The apathetic citizen mentioned above who watches TV may have an extraordinary understanding of the presidential. The pre-packaged portraits fit well under the more functional conception of a pure sample or instance.

Of course the way people engage with abstractions is different than gazing at the sky. The heavens are not nearly dynamic enough to indicate the rates at which abstractions change unless we view the stars in geologic time. Pure samples of abstractions are not exclusive, even within the same person. We can imagine a respondent watching a debate and telling a pollster that Candidate A

seemed more presidential than B before turning on the TV and watching *Dr. Strangelove*. Peter Sellers's incompetent President Muffley is funny because the abstraction of the presidential is not monolithic. In the film, when Muffley questions who would be stupid enough to authorize the “Emergency Attack Plan R” that enabled a rogue general to launch a nuclear first-strike on the Soviet Union, his staff reminds him that he endorsed the plan.

This is a common enough joke about executives, Sheen as President Bartlett on *The West Wing* does a version about an act protecting historic barns in New Hampshire that he signed as governor. The president is, after all, a government official, the pure instances of which are generally less well-regarded than samples of the presidential. There is a tension between different parts of the abstraction, different juxtaposed commonalities coming to the fore and fading. Is whiteness a more important (i.e. significant) aspect of the presidential when the president is speaking about crime or agriculture?

## **Description and Representation**

The character of an abstraction is more than just the commonalities within its material base. The way the instances are juxtaposed, their position and relation to one another, are easily as important to the construction of an abstraction as the instances themselves. A material base cannot simply exist, it must be in relation to itself. It makes no sense then to ask, as I did above, whether or not each one of Boyle's elements in “The Extinction Tales” is an extinction tale by itself without a pre-existing abstraction of extinction. The instance cannot exist without the abstraction, which requires a juxtaposed material base of greater than the single event.

I want to look at two different ways to express abstractions: description and representation. I do not wish to assert a limit on ways of expressing abstraction, but this dichotomy proves useful for analyzing the ways in which abstraction features in common discourse. We have already dealt extensively with representation in the analysis of pure instances. A pure example is a representation

of an abstraction through an instance – exactly what Marx cautioned earlier abstraction made impossible. What Burke adds to Marx is that representing abstraction is not possible *without reduction*. Our pure instances and less presumptuous representations are reductive, as Wittgenstein reminds us by asking what shape a sample of pure green would be. Despite the reduction, representation is central to our understanding of abstractions. Imagine a poster designed to teach kindergarteners the names of different fruits, this poster will probably contain images (representations) of different fruits. These pictures too will be reductive; will the apple be red or green? When representing abstractions, we ask the individual (instance) to stand for the whole (material base).

When describing an abstraction, we seek to list common aspects or characteristics within the material base. A good example of description would be a personal ad in which the author does not locate desirable qualities within an individual, but rather lists a constellation of attributes<sup>8</sup>. Imagine a less-creative example of this kind of writing, something like “Looking for a 30-40 year-old man. I prefer the tall, dark and handsome type. Interest in foreign films and the Delta Blues are pluses. Must be financially secure and have own form of transportation.” Is the author imagining a tall, dark and handsome 35 year old who likes Godard and Muddy Waters? Maybe, but the author constructs no such representation in these few words. A suitor could be well-paired with the author without matching almost any of the criteria listed, the qualities listed do not outline a representation (e.g. starting with “Looking for a Brad Pitt type.”), the description is necessarily open. We know that the author cannot list the commonalities within the set of all attractive suitors, so those listed would be simply a description of some evident commonalities. Description implies incompleteness within abstractions, which makes it particularly useful for attraction which is notoriously hard to predict based on a given set of attributes.

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<sup>8</sup> Whether or not these attributes could be said to accurately reflect the writer's interests, or to what degree the writer is aware of what elements s/he is attracted to are interesting questions, but trying to parse the describer's motives or limited understanding adds little to the model of description at this point. I examine the way in which abstractions reflect social conditions in a later section.

A fitting example of an attempt at a closed description of an abstraction is economist Peter Backus's "Why I don't have a girlfriend: An application of the Drake Equation to love in the UK." In the good-humored paper, Backus applies a methodology traditionally used to approximate the theoretical number of highly evolved civilizations in our galaxy to the number of women with whom he could sustain a long-term relationship. Using a system that owes as much to the structure of personal ads as it does to Frank Drake, Backus approximates or defines variables like attraction, age, proximity and education and concludes that there are 26 women he could date sustainably, giving him a 1 in 285,000 chance of meeting one of them on a given night. The author is understandably miserable with his results so I seek to give him some hope through dialectics.

Imagine how useless personal ads would be if they worked like Backus's equation; if people had to be able to define the abstract constellation of their attraction, they would be left with few options. Open description allows for the change that happens at the edge of abstraction, the rearranging of stars that is a product of circumstance. Backus's equation only gives him a chance with women with college degrees because he values education, but the abstraction of what he thinks of as educated can never be defined so arbitrarily. All of his abstractions, so probabilistically constrained in the paper, are open to constant negotiation. Imagine if attraction were static and something possessed instead of negotiated. One need only count the number of functional partnerships between individuals who could not at first stand each other to see that such closed abstract definitions fail to describe earthly practice. But surely there are *some* abstractions with strict definitions? Mathematics is built on abstractions like triangles and numbers, are these subject to the same rules? We look at these more below.

Both description and representation are tied closely to juxtaposition, which is the ingredient that allows both methods (to varying degrees of success) to express abstractions. In the case of representation, imagine how it would look without the juxtaposition of instances; every pure sample would enact tectonic violence on the viewer's abstraction. Representations (as distinguished from



instances by the representative pretension of standing for the whole) of an abstraction would be in constant competition. The viewer, without the ability to put the instances in relation to one another, is forced to fully negate each one when encountering the next. When we see a pure picture of an apple (as in the Kindergarten classroom above), we do not forget past representations or instances, we instead juxtapose them with other instances of apple-ness, that intangible quality shared by the constellation of apples, Apple Jacks cereal and sour-apple flavored candy. Yet some representations gain primacy in various ways that I examine below, with the end result that if most of us were asked to draw an apple, we would probably color it red.

Description too relies heavily on juxtaposition. If a description is just a nebulous cloud of characteristics to which the reader cannot attach instances, then the description fails to describe the abstraction. Imagine how a matchmaker would read the brief personal ad above. The description of the author's constellation of attraction yields instances in the reader, who might think “Frank likes foreign films,” “Jeff loves the blues,” or even “Tom is tall and has a car!” The juxtaposition of these instances produces the abstraction, each instance puts pressure on the scope. By the end of the ad, the matchmaker has established the type (e.g. “She's my type,” one of the harder abstractions to define) of man the author hopes to meet. Without juxtaposition there can be no “type;” if the instances do not reveal commonalities, then they fail to define an abstraction. We can think of situations when abstract descriptions fail to elicit juxtaposed instances; think of the frustration of anyone who has ever failed to describe what s/he was looking for to a salesperson at a clothing store. When entering this sort of shop without a strong conception of what one is looking for, one can be reduced to a very weak abstract description. At that point, the salesperson will usually start suggesting instances that may or may not fall under the abstraction, attempting through juxtaposition to better view the customer's constellation of, say, desirable shoes<sup>9</sup>. Compare this to

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9 Of course the two individuals in this interaction have different interests in the outcome, the customer looking not to spend more money than necessary and the salesperson – especially if s/he is working on commission – wanting the customer to make a more expensive choice. The unknown pair of shoes exists, even before it is selected, as a site of struggle.

the expert shopper and abstraction-describer who lists characteristics only to yield a “I’ve got just the thing.” Salespeople who are more knowledgeable about the store’s selection (and the industry at large) have more instances on which to draw and can more easily develop useful abstractions.

Whether it is a color or the presidential, a pair of desired shoes or a desired romantic partner, none of these abstractions can be expressed without instances in juxtaposition. But can any of these abstraction be said to be properly expressed? Both representation and description are necessarily incapable of fully expressing the scope of an abstraction. The first is reductive while the second lacks solid boundaries. But abstractions themselves are reductive and lack solid boundaries, to create strict definitions is to give static form to something dynamic. If it is not possible to express abstractions “accurately,” then we describe and represent (as well as name) abstractions strategically. Given our examples thus far, it should come as no surprise that abstractions have a political or ideological component.

## **The Ideological Myth**

In this section I seek to clarify and build upon the materialist dialectic fundamental to our conception of abstraction and to develop the primary role of contradiction and ideology within abstract thought as well as push the work away from the philosophical and toward the consciously political. To these ends, I return to Marx, specifically the *Introduction* as well as Louis Althusser’s explication “On the Materialist Dialectic.” Some of the conclusions in this section will destabilize earlier conceptions used to describe abstraction, which is of course itself a dynamic abstraction.

In this work, Althusser warns Marxist thinkers of an essential difference between Marx and Hegel, but cautions them not to read the difference between Hegelian idealism and materialism simplistically. He writes sarcastically, “[T]here is a *bad* use of abstraction (the speculative and idealist use) which reveals to us the contrasting *good* use of abstraction (the materialist use). And we prepare to put things straight, that is, to put abstraction in its right place by a liberating

'inversion' – for, of course, it is not the (general) concept of fruit which produces (concrete) fruits by auto-development, but, on the contrary, (concrete) fruits which produce the (abstract) concept of fruit. Is that all right? [emphasis in original]” (190) With this “Right? *Wrong!*” ending, Althusser means to complicate a materialist conception of abstraction. What then is the problem with beginning an understanding of abstraction in the concrete? The idealist alternative of starting with the abstraction does not seem like a good option, since we know abstractions to be reductive and riddled with contradictions.

At this point it might be easy to take contradictions within abstractions (e.g. red, green, and yellow as colors of the apple) as a given in our analysis, but we should remain cautious. These contradictions were revealed by examining the abstraction, not the concrete instances. The dialectic between the concrete and the abstract is central to the question of where materialist analysis ought begin. Althusser asserts that “The act of abstraction whereby the pure essence is extracted from concrete individuals *is an ideological myth*. [emphasis in original]” (191) Our pure samples (e.g. the presidential, the pre-packaged portraits) thus far have indicated semi-consistent resolutions of contradictions (i.e. there are commonalities between pure samples – like whiteness in the presidential – that are not often called into question in common discourse). To access the ideological components of abstractions that certainly seem present, we must first examine where ideology enters the materialist dialectic.

In Marx's critique of Hegel mentioned above, he differentiates between two views of the relationship between the concrete and the abstract. He writes,

“The concrete is concrete, because it is a combination of many objects with different destinations, i.e. a unity of diverse elements. In our thought, it therefore appears as a process of synthesis, as a result, and not as a starting point, although it is the real starting point and, therefore, also the starting point of observation and conception. By the former method the complete conception passes into an abstract definition; by the latter, the abstract definitions lead to the reproduction of the concrete subject in the course of reasoning. Hegel fell into the error, therefore, of considering the real as the result of self-coordinating, self-absorbed, and spontaneous operating thought, while the method of advancing from the abstract to the concrete is but a way of

thinking by which the concrete is grasped and reproduced in our mind as a concrete. It is by no means, however, the process which itself generates the concrete. The simplest economic category, say, exchange value, implies the existence of population, population that is engaged in production under certain conditions; it also implies the existence of certain types of family, clan or state, etc. It can have no other existence except as an abstract one-sided relation of an already given concrete and living aggregate.” (*Introduction*, 16)

The “former method” he describes as the mode of the seventeenth-century political economists which involves starting from the “living aggregate” of the concrete and arriving at “abstract general principles,” while the “latter method,” which Marx calls “manifestly the scientifically correct method,” is the inverse, starting with the abstract and moving to the concrete. (Ibid.) Althusser’s warning is well-made indeed, but Marx does stay true to his materialism and identifies the underlying concrete reality in any abstraction. To put Marx in vocabulary more congruent with the rest of the paper, he writes that the concrete appears to the viewer as juxtaposed, however that juxtaposition is not intrinsic at the level of the concrete but is a product of abstraction. The process that derives the abstract from the concrete seems to be what we are attempting to analyze, but that is impossible without recognizing the ways in which abstraction defines the concrete. After all, the “concrete” is still an abstraction.

At the same time, the concrete *does* exist apart from the way it is implicated in abstraction, as bodies in motion remain the fundamental material basis for conceptions. Jameson comes to a similar conclusion, “The concrete is no longer a tissue of generalities and abstractions, of universalities; but it is also no longer a mindless anti-theoretical empiricism...” (*Valences*, 283) Like a Gorgon’s head, we can only glimpse the concrete through the reflective (though distorting) mirror of abstraction. Perhaps the relation between human perception and the imagined pre-abstraction concrete is best described through a rephrasing of Kafka: “There is the concrete, but not for us.”

What does Althusser mean when he calls abstraction an “*ideological myth*?” We can imagine what he means by “myth,” the idea that abstractions are reductive but are used without this awareness. Discourses of truth rely heavily on faith in abstractions, giving them a mythic quality.

But where is ideology in the process? He outlines a different way to think about abstraction using the fruit example, “[T]he concept of 'fruit', is not the product of an 'operation of abstraction' performed by a 'subject' (consciousness or even that mythological subject 'practice') but the result of a complex process of elaboration which involves several distinct concrete practices on different levels, empirical, technical and ideological. (To return to our rudimentary example the concept of fruit is itself the product of distinct practices, dietary, agricultural or even magical, religious and ideological practices – in its origins.)” (191) We do not build abstractions from their concrete instances, rather, we are born into fruit. These pre-existing abstractions are based within the material conditions and practices of the society in which they arise. To stick with Althusser's example, tomatoes and avocados, although sharing structural commonalities with many fruits, are not commonly considered fruits themselves. Maybe some people learn in a science class or from a book that they are technically considered fruits, but no one asks a member of their household to pick up some fruit and expects to find refrigerator drawers full of tomatoes and avocados. Undoubtedly this has something to do with the dietary practices Althusser references; we eat tomatoes and avocados in different ways than most fruit, they lack flavor commonalities with many other instances in the category. They also share a narrative distinction from the rest of the fruits, which are commonly eaten by themselves or with something sweet with which their flavors are complimentary, not on sandwiches. Tomatoes and avocados are not on the kindergarten posters of fruits; the contradictions within the abstract category of 'fruit' are resolved unevenly. Abstractions are not only functions of ideology, but reflect the unevenness of the society that produces them.

Althusser calls this second quality, that of abstractions reflecting the inequalities of society within their contradictions, *overdetermination*, forgoing the considerably more painful “complexly-structurally-unevenly-determined. [emphasis in original]” (209) Overdetermination is the process by which some elements of the material base of an abstraction dominate the others in the production of representative instances. Althusser explains the operation of the term, “[W]e must concede that

contradiction can no longer be univocal (categories can no longer have a role and meaning fixed once and for all) since it reflects in itself, in its very essence, its relation to the unevenness of the complex whole. But we must add that, while no longer univocal, it has not for all that become 'equivocal', the product of the first-comer among empirical pluralities... ” (Ibid.) Our pure instances of abstractions are not the product of some statistical reflection of the concrete base, the instances used as representative do not just happen to be chosen. The ways instances are juxtaposed into abstractions cannot be understood empirically, but only as part of the process of interpellation whereby the abstract individual is turned into a subject.

### **The Ideology of Triangles**

For an example of overdetermination and a partial answer to the earlier question of mathematically defined abstractions, I turn to science writer Paul Hoffman's biography of the number theorist Paul Erdős. In *The Man Who Loved Only Numbers*, Hoffman historicizes math systems by examining the acceptance of negative numbers. He writes, “As late as 1660 Blaise Pascal, the father of probability theory, thought it nonsense to call anything less than zero a number ... The rise of capitalism helped make these entities real; ledgers of credit and debt and red ink on the balance sheet, paved the way for Western culture to embrace negative numbers.” (213) Numbers as we know them now have not always been numbers and will not necessarily constitute the constellation of numbers tomorrow. By saying that capitalism made negative numbers “real,” Hoffman makes it sound as if the change happened on the level of the concrete. However, negatives did not individually start to become accepted as legitimate numbers, a brave -42 did not cross the zero-line clearing the way for future negatives. Rather, the social practices associated with capitalism (e.g. debt and credit) – certainly ideological in character – differently juxtaposed negative and positive numbers. As these practices develop and the juxtaposed commonalities of negative and natural numbers grow stronger, the abstraction expands. This change happens not at

the level of the concrete, but in the abstraction of numbers. Marx puts it above, “The method of advancing from the abstract to the concrete is but a way of thinking by which the concrete is grasped and reproduced in our mind as a concrete.” We have, since the abstract never produces the concrete but reproduces it, at base, bodies in relations to one another described by debt. From that we have instances of “negative numbers” as the red numbers on a ledger. This is, as far as the abstraction of numbers is concerned, the concrete level. The abstract categorization of “numbers” reflects the changed juxtaposition of negative and normal numbers, reproducing concrete negative numbers *as such*. The “post-natural” numbers in their reproduction of concrete numbers reflects an ideological shift, and it is with reproduced concretes that individuals deal with numbers. And now, with as many negative as natural numbers in the material base of the abstraction, when asked for a number, we often assume it to be a positive number. Contradictions remain, even within mathematical abstractions

The same basic process works for the triangle, which we commonly hold to be an abstraction whose material base consists of figures made of three line segments adjoining at the ends, forming three angles that sum to 180 degrees. This seems simple enough, where is the need for a dialectical understanding of a shape that is structurally defined? A closed definition that reflected practice would be a serious stumbling block for a dialectical construct of abstraction such as the one I have attempted to define in these pages, one of whose principles is that abstractions are inherently dynamic. Is the triangle dynamic? Yes, here's how. First, there are plenty of ways in which we commonly invoke triangles without referring to the Euclidian definition. When we refer to a “love triangle,” we are using the abstraction to refer to a relationship between three points; the three lovers could stand in a line and the term would not be invalidated. This use invokes one characteristic of triangles, but does not reflect others. Euclidian geometry itself is only one construct among a multiplicity of systems. In Riemannian geometry, which views space as curved, triangles can never contain angles summing to 180 degrees, the reason we see triangles as approaching that

limit is because all earthly triangles are so small that they do not demonstrate the curvature of space strongly enough to perceive<sup>10</sup>. A good example of such a Riemannian figure would be the Bermuda Triangle, which is mapped onto the curved surface of the earth. To what degree do these three-dimensional figures possess triangle-ness? From Althusser and the example of negative numbers, we know this is a question that concerns more than the figures themselves. Their place in the abstraction is determined at the level of juxtaposition – a topologist who works with Riemannian figures on a daily basis would have a different abstraction of “triangle” than a seventh-grade geometry teacher.

Even admitting that the abstraction of “triangle” is determined by material juxtapositions, can it really be said to be *overdetermined*? How can the pre-existing abstraction of “triangle” into which we are born be said to be ideological, even if it is reductive? It may be easy to think of scientific or mathematical abstractions as changing in reaction solely to the extension of research into the subjects. Certainly this is part of it, the re-juxtaposition that comes with an earth-shattering theory or experiment can have an intense effect on abstractions. However, this re-juxtaposition changes the relations of more than just mathematical or scientific principles. Take the case of Galileo and heliocentrism; he attempts to re-juxtapose the Earth and the Sun before discovering, much to his chagrin, that he has accidentally re-juxtaposed humanity in its relation to the galaxy as well<sup>11</sup>. It does not seem too far a stretch to see Riemannian geometry as ideologically threatening in the same way: If human perspective is insufficient to see shapes as they are, it fundamentally calls into question our ability to comprehend the world. Surely this could be ideologically threatening to those who would offer a full picture of the universe based on human perspective. I do not imagine any ancient church conspiracy on the topic of triangles, but overdetermination is not necessarily such an intentional process. Before moving on to narrative, I want to take a moment on the

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10 Note that the lack of parallel lines in Riemannian geometry complicates the question of parallel narrative lines in anticonfluent structures.

11 This narrative of a scientist, philosopher or artist re-juxtaposing more than s/he intended or more than was safe in the political climate is relatively common. Compare Darwin's struggle with the theory of evolution or Andres Serrano's 1987 *objet d'art Piss Christ*.



ontological basis of abstraction in hopes that getting to the root of abstraction will enable radically different imaginings of what an abstraction could be.

## **The Void**

Like searching for a single drop in a lake, any basis for abstraction seems to slip through our fingers in the last few sections. The abstractions into which we are born exist as overdetermined conceptions prior to our understanding of them; the concrete is “not for us.” From the first gendering words at the birth of a child and the selection of a blue or pink cap, the child is ushered into the regime of overdetermined abstraction. Yet without Adam and his naming of the animals, we as yet have no ontological basis for these concepts. This need not necessarily be a problem in analyzing abstractions as they exist and as they could exist, but the question of abstraction without juxtaposition nags. The idealist conception of the “in itself” attributes to abstractions an inner core, an ultimate referent for the naming term. Here essence precedes category, which exists to describe something previous to itself. This is the transhistorical purity that crumbled under close scrutiny above. Marx uses the term once in the *Introduction* in reference to new organizations of production in conquered nations being “in [themselves]” products of old forms of production. (13) He also uses the term “*par excellence*,” invoking a purity within an abstraction, e.g. “Ricardo ... was the economist of production *par excellence*.” (12) Yet considering how hard Marx attempts to historicize the *Introduction* and his materialist philosophy writ large, it seems more consistent to read these uses as closer to the definition of purity proposed above than the Kantian tradition. Bertell Ollman posits that Marx's lack of definitions in his work point to his dynamic view of concepts, “Viewing the world as undergoing constant change and as devoid of the clear-cut classificational boundaries that distinguish the commonsense approach, Marx could not keep a definition of one factor from spilling over into everything.” (*Dance of the Dialectic*, 33) A

materialist conception of abstraction can recognize a provisional discursive center, as in Wittgenstein's schematic samples, but there seems to be no ontological center. Instead of seeing this lack as ending the investigation, I see it as beginning the naming. The common ontological basis for abstractions is not. How to name what is not? I turn to Alain Badiou's landmark work in set theory and ontology, *Being and Event* and his conception of the void set.

A big problem/opportunity in investigating abstraction is the multiplicity of applicable theoretical vocabularies. I will not attempt here a comprehensive mapping of the materialist terminology of abstraction onto Badiou's dictionary, but instead suggest that there exist significant conceptual resonances across the writings that make his work applicable to the question at hand. Set theory is mathematics based in abstraction, with the set serving to name the commonalities of its members. Badiou's "count-as-one" is a process by which a multiplicity becomes presented in terms of its members' relations – its-their juxtaposition. In the same way, we can discuss instances only in terms of abstractions, in terms of their juxtaposition to each other. So when Badiou goes looking for the unrepresentable, the "non-one," he searches in our vocabulary for the abstraction without content, without material base. We have established above that this is not, but that does not answer the question of naming.

Badiou poses the way to describe the absence of that which is neither abstract nor concrete this way, "The solution to the problem is quite striking: maintain the position that nothing is delivered by the law of Ideas, but *make* this nothing *be* through the assumption of a proper name. In other words: *verify via the excedentary choice of a proper name, the unrepresentable alone as existent*; on its basis the Ideas will subsequently cause all admissible forms of presentation to proceed [emphasis in original]" (66-67) Abstraction in itself is not, and Badiou names the not "the void set," or simply "the void." The void is the set without members, the abstraction without a juxtaposed concrete base. The term refers to the commonality of nothing among all abstractions but is strictly defined, or as Badiou puts it, "unique." The void is not abstract because it is not reductive,

it refers to a singular absence.

It makes no sense to ask what the void “is” since we know it to be not. Instead, we ought ask what the void is *not*. If the void is a decentered set without content, then it is constituted by its lack of elements. The void is the absence of juxtaposition, that which resists the possibility of abstraction. A set with even one element includes juxtaposition since set theory views numbers as abstractions. A set that contained a single element, let us say the number eight, still contains the juxtaposition necessary to give the number its meaning. For us to call the member of a set that contained one specific person – such as Jeopardy host Alex Trebek – a human, we need an abstract conception of humanity which, per Wittgenstein's questions about the color blue, requires a juxtaposition of multiple individuals. This is to what Badiou refers when he writes, “The one is not,” there can be no single meaningful element without juxtaposition. (66) When one tries to juxtapose different instances of the void, they collapse onto each other, no example differentiable, making it impossible to set them in relation to one another<sup>12</sup>.

How then are we to bridge the gap between the void and abstraction? In a standard dialectical reversal, if the void is the absence of juxtaposition then it also points to its possibility. To set up the division between the void and abstraction, the unjuxtaposable and the product of juxtaposition, is to require both. Using (and constituting) his dialectical method, Hegel destroys the gap between opposites, “[T]he relationship between acid and base and their reaction constitute a law in which these opposite sides appear as bodies. But these separated detached things have no actuality; the power which forces them apart cannot prevent them from at once entering again into a process, for they are only this relation.” (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, 153) Without abstraction, the void ceases to have meaning; without something to negate, what was an absence becomes an indescribable universal condition. We cannot lack something we cannot imagine, we cannot create an absence without creating something that could fill it. There is no gap between the two, but rather

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<sup>12</sup> Or, as Badiou puts it, “A multiple-of-nothing thus has no conceivable differentiating mark. The unrepresentable is inextensible and therefore in-different.” (67)

the interpenetration of opposites. The void is the ontological basis for abstraction in much the same way that abstraction is the ontological basis for the void: through negation.

## Narrative and Understanding

### Building Character

The concept of narrative has played a strange role up to this point. In the analysis of *The Extinction Tales*, I use the narrative(s) to inform the dialectical model of abstraction, but the references to the relationship between abstraction and narrative are not as yet fully articulated. In this section, I move the question of narrative to the fore. This is not a break in subject, but a return. If narrative has much to tell us about abstraction – as it has – then it would be foolish not to expect the reverse to be as true. Unfortunately, some of the suspense in this section has already been spent, as the big reveal of anticonfluent narratives – those whose events are not necessarily connected causally or temporally – occurs in an earlier section. I start then, in the desert of narratology, stranded with a strange vocabulary and no solid definitions. For the same reason Ollman explains Marx avoids strict definitions, I will not attempt to offer a restrictive definition of “narrative.” In this section, I will use a number of thinkers who have different conceptions of narrative, both from the one I use and from each other. By putting what I see as resonant passages in juxtaposition with one another, I hope to shape not a definition, but an understanding, a process that should become more clear in light of the content of the section itself.

Let us begin with a bare narrative, “King Louis XIV reigned in France from 1643 to his death in 1715.” There are a number of abstractions at play in this sentence, but I focus here on “King.” Although I called the narrative “concrete” since it refers to a single individual, we know that it is in no way so simple. Despite his place in history curricula around the globe, *Louis Quatorze* does not define the idea of “King” himself. Within our abstraction of kings, there is the

verb phrase “to reign.” What are kings? Kings are those who reign<sup>13</sup>.

This poses fundamental questions about the way we understand and comprehend narratives. I called the short story above “concrete,” but we know, as per the rephrasing of Kafka, that the concrete is not for us. Alasdair MacIntyre uses a dramatic language to think about the role of what he calls “characters” in history, arriving at a narrative critique of the concrete complimentary to Althusser's explication of the materialist dialectic. MacIntyre writes about the idea of the stock character in medieval morality plays – although contemporary sitcoms work just as well as an example – in which both the audience and actor understand the narrative role of the character. He writes, “To understand them is to be provided with a means of interpreting the behavior of the actors who play them, just because a similar understanding informs the intentions of the actors themselves . . . They furnish recognizable characters and the ability to recognize them is socially crucial because a knowledge of the character provides an interpretation of the actions of those individuals who have assumed the character.” (*After Virtue*, 27) We understand the actions of Louis XIV as constituting some action called “reigning” because we have a historical understanding about the character of kings. This character is certainly abstract, but MacIntyre draws our attention to its narrative quality. As with the earlier example of “dog” which includes the action of wagging, the abstraction of “king” involves certain narrative acts. It does not make sense to ask what a king *is* without meaning something about what a king *does*.

## **The Dialectical MacIntyre**

We have in a character an abstract narrative. In his critique of empiricist views of the self, MacIntyre contributes what, juxtaposed with the Marxist work on abstraction, turns to a critique of the concrete.<sup>14</sup> He objects to an idea of the self in isolation, writing, “Just as history is not a sequence of actions, but the concept of an action is that of a moment in an actual or possible history

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13 Of course they are not the only ones who reign, queens and tyrants do as well, but under different narrative conditions.

14 A juxtaposition to which MacIntyre would almost certainly object, but a useful one none the less.

abstracted for some purpose from that history, so the characters in a history are not a collection of persons, but the concept of a person is that of a character abstracted from a history.” (217) In the same fashion that Althusser attacks the idea of concrete substance, MacIntyre refutes the idea of concrete narratives. Rather, narratives come through a process of abstraction from a series of events; the narrative is not the events themselves, but the way in which we understand them. A close look at this passage draws the reader's attention to its circular nature. A history – or narrative if we prefer – is an abstraction, but from what is it abstracted? It is abstracted from “that history” itself! Despite its circularity, this makes unavoidable sense when we model the process of narrative on the process of abstraction. Without an abstract history, how would we bound a sequence of events from which to abstract?

An account of a baseball game in the sports pages is a history of the game, grasping what the writer deems to be noteworthy events and dropping the routine ground balls. But the bounds of a baseball game history are not limited to the nine innings that we think of as defining a single game. A star hitter's pulled ligament or a pitcher's DUI arrest on the way home belong to the history. It is possible to write a history of a single game because of the pre-existing abstraction of the game, one that includes injury reports and post-game felonies. The newspaper article is an abstraction of events over a duration delineated by the abstraction itself. The conceptual history is dependent on the concrete events from which it is abstracted, at the same time the abstraction reproduces the bounded sequence of events *as such*. Despite his professed discontent with dialectical thought<sup>15</sup>, we can point to the profoundly dialectical basis of MacIntyre's theories of narrative and character. If his rationale seems circular, it is because the dialectic is circular.

This dialectical idea of a history works “just as” well for MacIntyre's idea of character. The concept of a character is abstracted from a pattern of actions undertaken by individuals, at the same time, we understand the acting individuals in terms of their characters. Just as Marx posited a world

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15 “[D]ialectic is no longer the road to truth, but for the most part only a semi-formal procedure ancillary to enquiry.” (157).

of pre-existing abstractions, here we must recognize a world of pre-existing characters and their narratives. Paul Ricoeur adds a more consciously dialectical understanding of the relationship between narrative and events. He writes, “[W]e may say that ... [plot] draws a meaningful story from a diversity of events or incidents ... or that it transforms the events or incidents into a story. The two reciprocal relations expressed by *from* and *into* characterizes the plot as mediating between events and a narrated story. As a consequence, an event must be more than just a singular occurrence. It gets its definition from its contribution to the development of the plot.” (*Time and Narrative Vol. I*, 65) An inning, for Ricoeur, is only meaningful in the context of a full game. Notice how close Ricoeur gets to Marx's conception of the abstract not creating the concrete but reproducing it. Plot in this model is the mediating factor between the (concrete) events and the (abstract) narrative, which makes plot's corresponding parenthetical “(juxtaposition).” Plot is, in Ricoeur's usage, the juxtaposition of events that creates/is-created-by the narrative. A dialectical materialist view of this phenomenon might look like an adjustment of Marx's phrasing of the relationship in the *Introduction*; narratives do not produce events, but reproduce them in meaningful juxtaposition. Concrete events exist, but not for us.

## **A Grasping Together**

What then are the consequences of this view of the relationship between events, plots, and narrative?<sup>16</sup> The part of this formulation that seems most important to the rest of the paper is the notion of pre-existing narratives. These are the recognizable characters that MacIntyre references in the passage above, narrative abstractions through which we make sense of ourselves and each other<sup>17</sup>. But what are the mechanics for their creation? We know it to involve the grasping together of events into a plot based on a relationship between them, so if we take the earlier formulation of

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16 N.B. that this could just as meaningfully been written “narrative, plot and events.” Apologies to L.A.

17 “To understand them is to be provided with a means of interpreting the behavior of the actors who play them, just because a similar understanding informs the intentions of the actors themselves ... They furnish recognizable characters and the ability to recognize them is socially crucial because a knowledge of the character provides an interpretation of the actions of those individuals who have assumed the character.” (*After Virtue*, 27)

abstraction as our model, we know the process to involve commonalities, or some narratological equivalent. Ricoeur offers one possibility, “[T]he episodes constitute an open series of events, which allows us to add to the “then, and then” a “and so forth.” ... [T]he episodes follow upon one another in accord with the irreversible order of time common to physical and human events.” (67)

Temporality for Ricoeur is the commonality the episodes or events hold and by which they are juxtaposed. This seems to make sense for establishing a single narrative, but we know as per earlier formulations that the one is not, narratives are not created on their own, rather events occur in a world of pre-existing narratives and are reproduced as intelligible through these pre-existing structures. Jameson argues that this grasping together does not necessarily contain the temporal confluence that Ricoeur describes, especially within “the postmodern principle of collage” in which “it is the sheer fact of juxtaposition, rather than that sort of synthesis or harmonization, which is the operator of a new kind of unity of closure. There does not need to result, from this juxtaposition, any explicit meaning; what counts is the fact that the two irreconcilable items are held together for a moment within the bounds of a single act of consciousness, like the snapping of a photograph at random.” (514) The temporal ordering that Ricoeur requires is not the only method of bounding a history. In *The Extinction Tales*, Boyle's events are not linked temporally, but conceptually. But even the temporal linkage is a conceptual grasping, the bounds of an event being dictated by the abstract understanding.

MacIntyre gives us the example of a man digging in his garden; how are we to understand this action (or series of actions if the behavior is prolonged along a time sequence, which it is) narratively? He gives us a number of possibilities, “[T]he answers with equal truth and appropriateness be 'Digging', 'Gardening', 'Taking exercise', 'Preparing for the winter' or 'Pleasing his wife.’” (206) MacIntyre sees these possibilities as corresponding to narrative histories, that of social settings like the garden or of marriage, in which the event of digging is emplotted with other events that share/constitute a common narrative. He explains the idea of a “social setting,” as



something with a history with which individual agents are related. The key here is that we cannot interpret individual agents (or events) without their settings. (206) Different settings are linked to different emplotments of the same events; a narrative about gardening involves the growth of plants while a narrative about exercise may involve the man checking his weight in the morning. There is a multiplicity of possible understandings and a corresponding multiplicity of emplotments.

We have already brought up two social settings, the garden and marriage, both of which are narrative abstractions. There are stories that create/are-created-by what we know of the garden or marriage. We render actions or events intelligible when they are set in relation to similar events grouped in a narrative form. If we were to see a man digging in his garden, we would understand gardening as what he is doing in juxtaposition with the other grouped events that construct the narrative of the garden. The narrative history of the garden contains between its events a common relationship between the gardener and the soil. We assume the man to be planting seeds, weeding, or engaged in some such plant-nurturing behavior. We do not assume the gardener is destroying his neighbor's plants or digging for treasure; if he were doing the first he would be a saboteur, the second a treasure hunter. Both sabotage and treasure hunting are different social settings from gardening, though all are social practices and therefore fit MacIntyre's definition for setting.

MacIntyre's requirement that social settings have histories to which the agent is related brings to mind once again Derrida's idea of supplementarity<sup>18</sup>. There is always a possibility for new emplotments, for play, but each setting comes with its own history which reaches back *avant la lettre*. Think of the Roman Empire, an institution and therefore a social setting, whose history in *The Aeneid* reaches back to the Trojan War, long before any juxtaposition of individuals and institutions called Rome existed. Like *Tristram Shandy*, a setting's history includes its conception prior to its birth. There is not a setting that does not have a history that reaches back before its occurrence, therefore any sort of juxtaposition of agents should fit MacIntyre's history requirement.

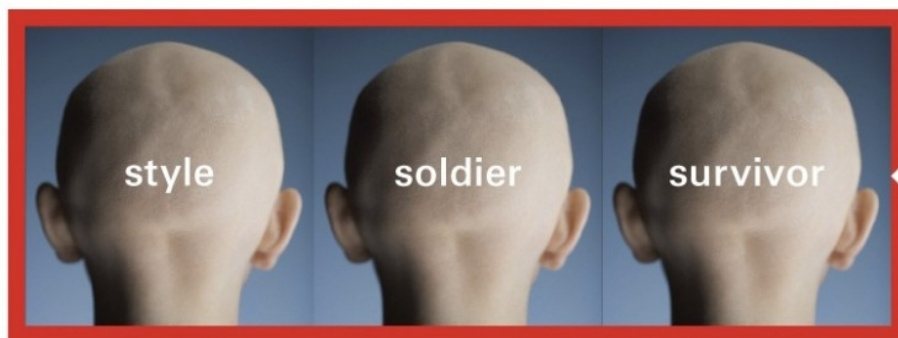
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18 Which I detach from its normal position (i.e. in reference to signification) and whose "character" I apply to juxtaposition. These terms turn out not to be as separate as one might imagine.

I do not think I am out of line at this point to think of setting in terms of the verb “to set,” that is, as a kind of juxtaposition. This juxtaposition of an agent (I would add events) in a narrative history is the second context in which MacIntyre places comprehensible actions, the first being the traditional temporal/causal plot of the concrete narrative. (208) But can we separate the two contexts so easily?

## **Bald Like Me**

Look at this advertisement for the British bank HSBC<sup>19</sup>:



When we look at the world, we see that different values are what make it so remarkable. With over 140 years of experience, we use this understanding to serve you better.

[us.hsbc.com/values](http://us.hsbc.com/values)

**HSBC**   
The world's local bank

©2008 HSBC Bank USA, N.A.

The text refers to these heads as embodying different values, but I see them as different narratives. Without the words, we are stuck in a position much like MacIntyre watching a man dig in a garden: Why is that person's head bald? With the words, we have some narrative understandings: 1. The figure shaved his or her head because it is a fashionable (lack of) hairstyle, 2. The man<sup>20</sup> shaved his head when he entered the armed forces, and 3. The figure has lost his or her hair during a victorious chemotherapeutic fight against cancer. There are a number of other possibilities for the “character”

<sup>19</sup> The text reads, “When we look at the world we see that different values are what make it so remarkable. With over 140 years of experience, we use this knowledge to serve you better.”

<sup>20</sup> The figure only acquires gender in the context of the second narrative. Hair regulations for the U.S. Army (the ad is American) require that men have their hair cropped or buzzed but prohibit women from wearing their hair in “trendy styles that result in shaved portions of the scalp.”

of the bald figure that are (understandably) excluded from the advertisement. The hairless figure could also be a prisoner of war, a Hare Krishna, or a neo-Nazi. No matter what setting we select, we can thereby derive a causal/temporal context. The “survivor” developed cancer, was diagnosed with cancer, had chemotherapy, lost his or her hair, and survived. But we only come up with this concrete understanding in the context of the narrative setting. Without the word-cues or some other sort of context, we have no way – or an irreducible multiplicity of ways – to understand individual events, instances or actions. Events that have not been emplotted, that is reproduced as such through narratives, are incomprehensible. To separate the concrete and abstract narratives is to ignore that we only access the first through the second.

Pre-existing narratives exist then on the abstract level and reproduce concrete narratives as such in a comprehensible form. What narrative adds to the previous understanding of the materialist dialectic is that a grasping together or juxtaposition occurs on both the abstract and concrete levels. We understand “gardening” as an abstraction, a grasping together of various instances, but we must also understand that individual instances of gardening are emplotted. The individual incomprehensible and unimaginable moments are grasped together to form a narrative, reproduced that way by the abstract pre-existing narratives. Here any understanding of the unmediated concrete disintegrates. The forming of concrete instances into the narrated histories that MacIntyre calls “the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions” is a process of abstraction. (208) This understanding not only how we describe the world, but how we experience it in the first place. Empirical facts are products of overdetermined narrative understandings, an essential point in the construction of alternative modes of understanding. If the facts of the world as they exist are only one of many possible emplotments, then counter-narratives present legitimate possibilities for comprehending events. Another narrative is possible.

## **So Many John Henrys**

The consequence lurking in the background of this whole section is the overdetermined abstraction. If narratives are abstract then they are the subject to the same ideological process that Marx outlines and Althusser clarifies. The system by which comprehensible events are reproduced as such is not neutral, but subject to the same determinants that affect the rest of society. An unequal society will produce unequal narratives. Instead of subjecting the reader to more quotations from the likes of Professor MacIntyre, I think a literary analysis would be just as helpful and have the added benefit of bringing the anticonfluent back into the discussion.

Colson Whitehead's sophomore novel *John Henry Days* is not structured in the same manner as “The Extinction Tales,” but it still contains causally disconnected narratives. In *JHD*, the elements are connected in an understandable time sequence – although the *fabula* and *sjuzhet* are far from identical – and are all set within the United States. Boyle's story was more useful for understanding the process of abstraction because some of his elements verged on non-narrative, these are instances (like E<sub>2</sub> and the ovens of Auschwitz) that have so many possible narrative settings that they might lack independent meaning<sup>21</sup>. The elements in *JHD* could stand on their own as narratives, but acquire certain meanings only in juxtaposition with the other elements. This makes Whitehead's work more useful in analyzing the process of narrative abstraction, since each element is itself a meaningful story.

The overt commonality between the elements is the legend of John Henry and his race with the steam drill. The first element<sup>22</sup> in *JHD* is a series of letters to a musicologist trying to discover the basis of the John Henry folksong from individuals who claim to have met the real Henry or claim to know the story to be invented. The writers do not as a group agree on any detail of the John

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21 Imagine reading Boyle's second element without any prior knowledge of World War II and not juxtaposed with the rest of the elements, what would it mean? Bob Odenkirk deals with a similar ignorance in his short film “[The Pity Card](#)” in which a man discovers that the date he has accidentally brought to the Holocaust Museum has never heard of the Holocaust. Needless to say, it profoundly reshapes her narrative understanding of humanity.

22 The elements in *JHD* are far less easily distinguished from each other than those in “The Extinction Tales,” and given that it is such an arbitrary process, there are a number of possible naming systems with which I would not argue. In my naming, I focused on separating narratives whose characters do not enter the same narrative space. Don DeLillo's *Underworld* is another example of *JHD*-level anticonfluentality, but I decline to analyze it here if only due to space considerations. I shudder to imagine attempting to name and separate its elements.

Henry story, but all claim to have first or second-hand knowledge. This first element in *JHD* is itself anticonfluent in that it contains different and ambiguously connected elements. An extremely meticulous analysis would break down this section by sub-elements and look for commonalities, but there are a few that jump out at the reader. Henry's race comes up in almost all of the letters, and even if they do not agree on his exact shade, all but one claim he would have been considered black by the hypodescent laws of the time. Those who agree he lived know Henry to have worked on the railroad and a number bring up his legendary race with the machine.

By the end of element one on page six, Whitehead has come to familiar conclusions about the abstract way we access concrete narratives. If John Henry raced a steam drill, then that would be a concrete event, not something abstract, but a specific body in action. But even if all the writers had watched Henry on the day (if it existed) of his race, there would be no unified narrative understanding of the event. The actions are incomprehensible without an emplotment, and every recitation is going to grasp different elements in accordance with different abstract overdetermined narrative understandings.

$E_1$  is one of the elements in *JHD* that Whitehead repeats. The first instance ( $E_{1a}$ ) of  $E_1$  is just a series of letters about the legend of John Henry with no further context. In  $E_{1b}$ , Whitehead introduces the black musicologist Guy Johnson combing the South for the origins of the “Ballad of John Henry,” trying to discover if any such man really lived. In free indirect discourse, Johnson laments the impossibility of his task, “The Ballad of John Henry' has picked up freight from every work camp, wharf and saloon in this land; its route is wherever men work and live, and now its cars brim with what the men have hoisted aboard, their passions and dreams ... One by one the first-person accounts collapse under his interrogations into second-person accounts, or worse, complete falsehood.” (155) I do not envy Johnson, because he searches for the center of an abstraction and it is not to be found. To ask “What really happened?” is to ask for a definitive narrative explanation, not incomprehensible actions, but a plot. This plot is an act of abstraction which requires narrative

setting. Like in the ad with the bald heads, there are always a number of possible plots.

Perhaps the most important line in  $E_1$  is when Johnson interviews an old man who Johnson has heard knew Henry. Whitehead writes, “Which John Henry do you want to know about?” Mr. Sanders murmured. ‘I know so many John Henrys.’ (162) Whitehead mentions at a number of places in the novel that John and Henry were the most popular names for freed slaves, so an old black man at this time probably would have known a large number of John Henrys, but this answer resonates on a deeper level. John Henry in the novel is not a concrete individual but a character in MacIntyre's terminology. The song(s) and the legend(s) constitute an abstract narrative.

The story of John Henry exists in a larger form than the concrete event (whether fictional or real), instead it accumulates and changes as it is made comprehensible. Johnson comes to the conclusion that, “whether the John Henry legend rests on a factual basis is, after all, not of much significance. No matter which way it is answered the fact is that the legend itself is a reality, a living functioning thing in the folk life of the Negro.” (161) What goes unsaid in this discourse is that Johnson is one of those Negroes for whom the story has a life. Johnson develops a juxtaposition for the narrative song based on his knowledge of America as it exists for a black man.

Johnson watches in horror as a white colleague tells his version of the John Henry story, “Guy cringed as Reed gloried over the more vulgar versions of the ballad – the ones containing verses attributing a voracious carnal appetite to the steeldriver and describing extravagant sexual conquests – and he did not like the look in Reed's eyes. He resembled a carnival barker gleefully describing the nether parts of the Hottentot Venus, with his frothy thin lips and wild eyes.” (Ibid). Reed's narrative understanding of the John Henry narrative is strongly influenced by the ideology of white supremacy, whereby blacks are oversexualized and turned into caricatures. Where Reed sees a physically powerful and dominant Negro<sup>23</sup>, Johnson “can study the legend but [he] cannot conceive of the man” for reasons that will hopefully become apparent later. (162)

$E_2$  is Whitehead's main narrative space, in which he tells the story of J. Sutter, a reporter

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<sup>23</sup> To say he sees a “black man” would probably be too charitable to Reed.

who makes his living by hopping junket to junket for free food while free-lancing articles about all types of events. In *JHD*, J. is in the process of trying to break the record for longest amount of time out on jobs without stopping. He survives off the tricks of the trade: free prime rib and claiming strangers' receipts as expenses. J.'s final junket will turn out to be the festival named in the novel's title, located in Talcott, West Virginia, celebrating the release of a new John Henry stamp, where J. will be shot and killed by police. Whitehead's juxtaposition of the elements is what gives  $E_2$  its meaning, without which one could read it as mostly a statement about the bizarre media underworld of junketeers. Instead, J.'s narrative means something different in juxtaposition to stories of black Americans, including John Henry himself.

$E_6$  is the narrative of the legend, as much as any single narrative could constitute the abstract idea of John Henry. There are so many versions of the race and the man in the novel that this version is implicitly acknowledged as one among many and holds no authoritative truth. Even so,  $E_6$  is the longest articulation and so deserves particular attention. In  $E_6$ , Henry is a former-slave, working a brutal job laying the railroad for meager pay. Here is the John Henry story without context of the legend. No contest ever occurs in  $E_6$  though there are two referenced<sup>24</sup>, Whitehead does not evoke the narrative setting of the epic contest. Instead, Whitehead gives a different setting for the story. After John Henry destroys the hands of another young black shaker<sup>25</sup>, he talks to his boss. "John Henry said he needed another shaker. The boss spat into the ground and nodded. There was no shortage of niggers." (86) Like any other newly freed slave, Henry was expendable in the eyes of his employers. If he were to die working – as he does according to most of the renditions of the legend in the novel – he could be replaced by any number of others *just like him* as far as the bosses were concerned. This is the event(s) of John Henry's life arranged (comprehensibly) in the narrative of white supremacist exploitation of blacks in America. Positioning the legend this way calls into question the American State's usage of the Henry story.

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24 Both the legendary race with the steam drill as well as a race with an Irish worker.

25 The worker who holds the chisel that Henry would hit with his hammer to dig railroad tunnels. Whitehead describes it as a precarious job in which one false move could result in a mutilated hand.

State accounts of John Henry's life and death play an important role in the tensions in *JHD* and Whitehead's construction of the abstract narrative as a site of struggle. The first official narrative comes in E<sub>3</sub>, a press release from the U.S. Postal Service about the commemorative stamp and the John Henry Days celebration. "Since the 1870s, John Henry has been extolled as a strongman born with a hammer in his hands and the ability to drive steel for ten continuous hours<sup>26</sup> ... 'Folk heroes like John Henry represent the best of American values,' said Postmaster General Marvin Runyon." (16) There is no mention of slavery in this celebratory account and it is unclear how back-breaking physical labor for ten hours a day represents the "best of American values." This is the way the narrative defines the edge of the plot. Looking at the State account, the bounds of the narrative reflect ideological interests. There is no mention of slavery, wages, or Henry's death. The details that have been grasped together in this account fit with the abstract narrative of America's heroic founding and the railroad as the grand interracial project on which we built our modern nation. Later when J. reads through the press packet for John Henry Days, he finds another account, "The C&O railroad provided a great opportunity for the slaves freed by Mr. Lincoln's Proclamation. The C&O paid the passage to West Virginia for any free black willing to work and provided the first salary some of those men had ever seen ... When work on the Big Bend Tunnel finished many stayed on with the railroad for the rest of their lives. They were proud to join the C&O family." (233) This is one version of the abstract narrative including the relationship between the railroad and its black workers, of which Henry's tale is one instance. This account is not so much untrue<sup>27</sup> as it is, as Althusser might put it, "an ideological myth." There are no shakers with amputated limbs and the railroad is to be celebrated for paying its workers despite the color of their skin.

The most dramatic institutional account of the John Henry legend is in J.'s recollection of a cartoon version from his elementary school English class. "[N]o mention of slavery in the cartoon.

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26 Whitehead continues, "It is said that while working for the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad on the Big Bend Tunnel just outside of Talcott, John Henry challenged a steam drill to a race and swing his hammers so hard that he beat the machine. Railroad workers who arduously[!] labored during the building of the nation's rail system literally sang the praises of this hero." (Ibid).

27 Although it seems important to note that Mr. Lincoln's Proclamation did not free any slaves.



Were they supposed to take his walk from home in search of his fate as the slave's walk from the plantation? No, the children were supposed to find their own experience in John Henry's retreating back and his parents tears: Mom closing the door after tucking them in, their first day of school, the view from the old school bus ferrying them to camp. These American particulars because John Henry was an American.” (139) In this passage Whitehead brings to mind the role of abstract narratives in rendering events understandable. The class, which, except for J., was white, was supposed to see Henry as an American character in juxtaposition with their own lives. Henry is described as engaging in the standard American plot in which the individual grows and leaves his or her family to seek (and find!) his or her fortune.

But the end of the cartoon resonates differently with the young J. In the cartoon, Henry wins in his race with the steam drill before collapsing due to fatal exhaustion. The last words of the chapter are chilling, “Mrs. Goodwin, why did he die at the end? Mrs. Goodwin, if he beat the steam engine why did he have to die? Did he win or lose?” (142) If John Henry was an American, then why does he die at the end? Here is the tension between John Henry as American and John Henry as nigger, two abstract narratives that reproduce the plot differently. These are not equal stories, simply different graspings of the same actions, but *overdetermined abstractions*. The State and its institutions propagate a specific narrative understanding to buttress the dominant ideology of American exceptionalism. The narrative is a site of struggle where different classes fight for how the event is to be socially understood.

The John Henry song exists in *JHD* as a counter-narrative, keeping alive the narrative understanding of the protagonists suffering and struggle in a racist and exploitative system. Pamela Street is the second main character in  $E_2$ , her father ran a museum of John Henry memorabilia in their house and she goes to Talcott after his death when the new museum wants to buy her inherited collection. While in Talcott for the celebration, Pamela remembers her father's words; he would refer to any event in her life, success or failure, as “Layin' the line.” (113) This phrase is an

invocation of the John Henry narrative, but not the State's version. Jean-Francois Lyotard mentions this idea of folk wisdom or phrases like this in *The Postmodern Condition* when he asks the reader to “[c]onsider the form of popular sayings, proverbs, and maxims: they are like little splinters of potential narratives, or molds of old ones<sup>28</sup>, which have continued to circulate on certain levels of the contemporary social edifice.” (22) Each time Whitehead invokes the Ballad, the reader knows that the story is being changed/defined, that he is referring to the dynamic narrative. This is where the author uses an anticonfluent narrative structure to loosely describe the scope of the John Henry story.

One additional way *JHD* is different from “The Extinction Tales” is that all of Boyle's elements share the same abstract narrative. In Whitehead's novel, different elements shape each other's meanings but they are not nearly as parallel. There are in *JHD*, however, a number of elements that share a somewhat parallel abstract narrative structure, that of the John Henry counter-narrative. E<sub>12</sub> is Whitehead's story of the singer Paul Robeson. In the space of six pages, Whitehead describes Robeson using John Henry's name four times. (226-231) The author makes clear that Robeson is an instance of the John Henry narrative, writing the singer's life parallel to the steeldriver's. At the end of a story about a man possessing fantastic talent and strength, victimized for his race and then for his politics after he spoke about what he had experienced, Robeson dies exiled in England, spent and exhausted trying to live as an American and a black man at the same time.

Just as MacIntyre writes of “countless Hectors and countless Andromaches whose lives embodied the form of their Homeric namesakes, but who never came to the attention of any poet,” Whitehead draws the reader's attention to a multiplicity of John Henrys by juxtaposing their lives in an anticonfluent narrative. (212) Henry and Robeson share more than the color of their skin, they share a “character,” a *story line*. We remember from the earlier discussion of Boyle's story that

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28 I would argue here that splinters of potential narratives are only understood through the molds of old ones and that the two are not so easily differentiated.

Robeson does not just fit into a category called “John Henry” or “black guy in America,” he is the category, the events of his life reproduced as a comprehensible narrative are a part of the constellation that is the abstract character of John Henry.

Through his use of anticonfluent elements, Whitehead stretches the abstract narrative across a number of lives. The story is not just male, the author writes of Pamela as she holds a temp job, only to be jettisoned when a mechanical replacement showed up. “[O]ne day she came in and was informed that the Tool had arrived. It worked to specifications and that was her last day there. She was only temporary.” (291) This is not a story just about working on the railroad, Whitehead tells us, it is bigger than that. Focalized through J., Whitehead writes about a panhandling drug addict who hits J. up for money in the middle of the night. “This old hammer killed John Henry but it won't kill me!” the addict sings, calling forth the narrative fragment and giving it context within his own struggle to survive (308) The narrative is not just for the famous or legendary, and we understand this through the anticonfluent juxtaposition.

There are no shortage of John Henrys for Whitehead, and he draws attention to the shaping of the character at a number of points in the novel. In *E<sub>8</sub>*, Whitehead imagines one of the authors of the Ballad musing about his place in the song, and by extension, the narrative. “Song done? Not yet. He knows that. . . . He wasn't there at Big Bend. This is his own John Henry, who he figures is a man like himself, just trying to get along. And if the man who taught him the song has his own John Henry, let him. The next man will have his<sup>29</sup>.” (102-3) Every parallel element acts like an addition of a lyric here or a change in tempo there. Their songs are the same, they share the same character, and so the juxtaposition of each one changes how we understand the constellation as a whole and the stars as individuals.

The instances I have listed of the John Henry narrative are only a few of the many in the book; *JHD* has the content of a much larger novel when it comes to analysis, and I have not analyzed some of the most cutting elements. Whitehead demonstrates how successfully

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29 And we add “hers.”

anticonfluent narratives function as tools of social critique. We know the story reflects deep and enduring inequalities in American society because we have a wide-ranging scope. The author does not “aim for the heart” with his story, but stabs with precision. Notice, as in Boyle's story, Whitehead's title is plural. “John Henry Days” is not only the name of the novel and the festival at its climax, but a description in the way that “The Extinction Tales” is. When J. thinks of Pamela living above a John Henry museum as a child, Whitehead gives us the fragment, “Every waking day, a history of it, John Henry.” (189) For the black Americans in *JHD*, every day is a John Henry day.

Whitehead makes the commonalities between the legendary steeldriver and J. quite evident. At one of the celebration dinners in Talcott, J. almost chokes to death on a piece of food and is only saved when Alphonse Miggs – the alienated man who the next day pulls out a gun in the middle of an event and fires in the air, leading the police to fire and kill J. in the process – notices that no one else in the room sees J. suffocating and saves his life. While choking, J. goes through a mental narrative of Talcott inconsistent with the press packet<sup>30</sup>, “This place will fucking kill him. He should have known better. A black man has no business here, there's too much shit, too much history gone down here. The Northern flight, right: we wanted to get the fuck out. That's what they want, they want us dead. ... They know how to watch a nigger die.” (79) While J. loses oxygen flow to his brain, a boy on stage, one of the five black people at the dinner<sup>31</sup>, sings “The Ballad of John Henry.”

The final sentence, “They know how to watch a nigger die,” puts the John Henry Days in a new setting. All the people – almost all of them white – are together to celebrate a contest that killed a black man. Whitehead does not use the heavy-handed imagery of a Klan lynching, but the infamous pictures are part of the montage J. evokes. In the final scene, Pamela and J. walk to the field where the reader already knows a police officer will shoot him. Whitehead's final sentence cements the relationship between J. and Henry, “When they came down the mountain she asked,

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30 Also presumably different from the piece he was going to write as a professional junketeer.

31 J. counts.

what's the J. stand for? He told her.” (389) J. is John Henry, as is Robeson and the Southern California addict, and John Henry is all of them as well.

Lyotard adds to the relationship between the individual and the abstract narrative, “In a sense, the people are only that which actualizes the narratives: once again, they do this not only by recounting them, but also by listening to them and recounting themselves through them.” (23) This “recounting themselves through” is similar to the process of narrative reproduction in line with Marx's materialist dialectic; J., Pamela, Robeson, Johnson, (and we could go on) are recounted through the abstract John Henry narrative, they are made comprehensible this way. We can think of the “Ballad” as this kind of recounting, telling the story not only of the sung, but of the singer as well. However, this is only the way they are reproduced as Whitehead juxtaposes them. We know from *JHD* that each plot has a number of possible narrative understandings and the commonalities Whitehead makes dominant in the text are not the ones usually offered.

The counter-narrative to the State's vision of Henry as a proud American hero involves a multiplicity of stories. We do not understand the state's narrative without context<sup>32</sup>, and Whitehead does not expect us to fabricate our own, so he delivers one in anticonfluent fashion. Compare this to the failure of juxtaposition in *The Jungle* in which Sinclair does not build up a counter-narrative framework bigger than the individual instance. Whitehead avoids the pitfalls of representation – Robeson cannot be here “Santaclausified” – through the multiplicity of narrative elements. The counter-narrative has a wide material base in *JHD*. The political work done is the rejuxtaposition, creating a counter to the state's narrative about blackness through a constellation of instances. In creating this abstraction, Whitehead creates its history as well, and we see it stretch back to the concurrent foundation of the American state and racial hierarchy. He has rewritten the American racial narrative, revealing its overdetermination and offering an alternative understanding.

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32 “[T]he teacher mentioned slavery, swiftly, usually only in terms of Mr. Lincoln's proclamation, as if the peculiar institution only came to be in its ending...” (139).

# The Common

## **Narrative In Class Society**

Now that I have done my due diligence with the foundations and connections between abstraction and narrative, I turn my attention to the socio-political consequences of these conclusions. Unequal societies produce abstractions that reflect those inequalities in their structures; this is the essence of overdetermination. When we add the conclusions about narrative and abstraction, we are left with the idea that unequal societies will produce narrative understandings that reflect those inequalities. A white-supremacist society will produce a narrative understanding of John Henry that hides the crimes of the past and present. A hetero-normative society will produce a narrative understanding of a man digging in his backyard that assumes he is married to a woman.

A good contemporary example of an overdetermined narrative is the finding/looting controversy in which two news accounts labeled almost identical photos of Louisiana residents swimming through water with bags of groceries. One was labeled “finding,” the other “looting;” one was a picture of a white couple, the other a black man.




**AP Associated Press** AP - Tue Aug 30, 11:31 AM ET

A young man walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2005. Flood waters continue to rise in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina did extensive damage when it

[Email Photo](#) [Print Photo](#)

**RECOMMEND THIS PHOTO** » Recommended Photos  
 Recommend It: Average (138 votes)  
 ☆☆☆☆☆ **★★★★☆**

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**AFP** 3:47 AM ET

Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area in New Orleans, Louisiana. (AFP/Getty Images/Chris Graythen)

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Neither image has much narrative meaning on its own, we are aware of the hurricane and that people were left without food and needed to find ways to eat, but we do not know what is happening in the pictures. Except we do. In a racial state, changing the color of the subject of a photo can change the dominant narrative. We construct divergent stories around pictures that differ only by the race of the subjects. Even if the photographer watched the white residents “find” and the black ones “loot,” it does not explain a narrative understanding centered around property. We might think that our dominant narrative understanding of any person swimming through a flooded city with bags of food would be one of survival, but not as determined by American material relations. The individuals' actions are made comprehensible by their relation to the ownership of the goods they carry. Clearly this reflects a certain ideological understanding of individuals – specifically one that sees them primarily in relation to private property. How are these narrative understandings assigned?

This points us to the relationship between classes and narrative. In *The German Ideology*,

Marx addresses the way we attach narrative understanding to abstract classes, “[W]hen for example the bourgeois tells the proletarian that his, the proletarian's, human task is to work fourteen hours a day, the proletarian is quite justified in replying in the same language that on the contrary his task is to overthrow the entire bourgeois system.” (*The German Ideology*, 307) The debate here is over the abstract narrative of the proletarian. What is a proletarian? Is he someone who works for the benefit of the bourgeois or someone who brings the collapse of the class system? Is he a male? Marx constructs a narrative understanding across his work based on the second position about the MacIntyrean character of the proletariat, that is, the proletarian is he who will destroy capitalism.

This narrative is not particular to the proletarian, but universal. The Marxist narrative of the capitalist involves his overthrow and subsequent subjugation at the hands of his former workers. Marx sees it as the goal of each class to assert their narrative as universal, to see not only their actions and institutions in terms of the class narrative, but the actions of all people and their relationships to all institutions through it. The members of any ruling class derive their power from the current societal juxtaposition. That juxtaposition is common to the members of society – since they are both described by the abstraction and change it themselves – yet it does not reflect everyone's class interests. In order for the juxtaposition to “hold good for everybody,” the narrative must be asserted universally. (*The German Ideology*, 348) At the same time, revolutionary counter-narratives must also be universal, for they seek to replace the dominant narratives not only in the minds and juxtapositions of the formerly oppressed, but throughout all of society.

This idea in Marx's work is what leads Monique Wittig to write, “It is the attempted universalization of the point of view that turns or does not turn a literary work into a war machine.” (*The Straight Mind*, 75). She takes the dislodging of dominant narratives very seriously as an act of social war and we should not misunderstand the stakes of the issues at hand. We see the violence of overdetermination in *JHD*, where the consequences of the “American” narrative are the explanation away and perpetuation of racist systems of oppression. Whitehead's novel is a “war machine”



because the John Henry narrative is made universal within the text. The white characters do not get to continue on their “American” narrative, instead their privilege acquires new meaning in juxtaposition to the John Henry narratives; their narratives *are* John Henry narratives. The hidden black victims of white privilege are present narratively in every element, even if they are absent on the page.

*JHD*'s dominant narrative understanding is a story of American white-supremacist doctrine and black resistance. The cartoon in J.'s elementary school classroom is a re-imagining of an instance of the dominant narrative understanding in terms of the counter-narrative. J.'s pleading question at the end, “Why did he have to die?” lays bare the ideology of the institutional John Henry narrative in juxtaposition. The reader knows that the grasping together that constitutes the plot of the movie has failed to grasp certain elements. How does Henry's family afford to feed him the legendary amounts of food? Why are his teeth so clean? Why doesn't the white doctor show more hesitation before touching Henry? Under the “American” narrative understanding as Whitehead describes it, these ungrasped elements are unnecessary. Under the John Henry narrative that Whitehead advances in *E<sub>5</sub>*, it remains ungrasped whether or not he wins the races, an omission that would make the institutional narrative of a heroic and victorious John Henry incomprehensible. Stories that we understand are necessarily only one potential grasping of events.

As the author, Whitehead has to decide what and what not to grasp in his plots. These graspings will serve as the basis for the ideological character of the abstract narrative. The way Whitehead grasps the elements in his version of worker John Henry – both the presence of exploitation and the absence of the contest – lays one brick in the construction of a universalizing grasping, an abstract narrative. The abstract narrative springs in the reader from the emplotment decisions within the individual elements *which allow* the anticonfluent juxtaposition of the elements which makes present commonalities. Commonalities are a product of at least two levels of abstraction: the grasping involved in the construction of a comprehensible instance and the

abstraction from juxtaposed instances that produces the commonalities as such. Each element is a weapon for the universalizing war machine, juxtaposed they constitute a mode of narrative understanding, a consistent pattern of grasping distinct from that of the dominant narrative. These graspings are the narrative equivalent of the relation of bodies, they are the juxtapositions which narratives make comprehensible.

Whitehead is engaged in a struggle that makes clear that narrative is not destiny and that “supplemental” narratives outside dominant understandings are possible. The employment of a narrative is a process that involves a grasping together but also its opposite, a falling out. The grasped exists in juxtaposition with the ungrasped. For Derrida, the logic of supplementarity involves the outside (ungrasped) replacing a default that exists on the inside (grasped). (*Of Grammatology*, 215) We see within any narrative there is the presence of the ungrasped., meaningful omissions that would not be meaningful without an understanding of what was missing. Juxtaposition with other narrative instances allows the reader to see the ungrasped. Ralph Ellison's decision not to grasp the name of the *Invisible Man* is meaningful because named protagonists are common to most novels. Counter-narratives, like Whitehead's longest rendition of John Henry's story, involve a re-grasping, the bringing in of the outside. But as Derrida reminds us, the defaults are internal, the ungrasped is present in the grasped.

Due to the internal threat of supplementarity, narrative abstractions cannot be defined in a debate between two parties, but are sites of struggle where the insurgents are armed with the weapon of counter-juxtaposition. The fates of narrative understandings ultimately rest at the level of bodies. To look more closely at the becoming of abstract narratives, I turn to Marx and his narrative struggle. We know about the construction of abstract narratives that they pre-exist subjects but are also in a constant state of becoming, with instances in juxtaposition always changing their characters. Marx puts it this way, “[E]mpirical relations, caused by real people in their real intercourse and not at all by the holy concept of man, are afterwards interpreted, portrayed,

imagined consolidated and justified by people as a revelation of the concept of 'man.'" (*The German Ideology*, 251) The word "afterwards" can be a bit misleading considering Althusser's addition in which empirical relations are only reproduced as such through a process of abstraction. We should read this sentence as an affirmation of Marx's materialism in which the fundamental basis for all abstraction is real bodies in action, without reading it as a negation of his dialectics in which we only have access to concrete empirical relations in the abstract.

If we think of empirical relations as an apprehension of juxtaposition, then we recognize that the "holy concept of man" does not cause human intercourse but strongly affects the way we grasp the events of that intercourse into comprehensible narratives. And yet there is an element of freedom in Marx's theory; there is space for the juxtaposition of counter-narratives through material juxtapositions that are incomprehensible under current abstract narratives. The Communist Narrative itself was at one point a counter-narrative of this sort. When workers dropped their tools and picked up weapons, it was beyond the understanding of the character of the worker under capitalism. *If his job is to work 14 hours a day, what's he doing with that rifle?*

The re-juxtaposition of workers' position relative to the bosses, the factories, the state and to each other causes a narrative rupture. But over the course of the twentieth century, the revolutionary proletariat as a narrative has been swallowed into the dominant narrative of capital. In the Russian Revolution we see now the politically oppressed and impoverished masses rising up to overthrow a dictator only to install a misguided economic model that will dissolve under the natural pressures of globalization. As far as the dominant character of the worker in the U.S. is concerned, the revolutionaries were not acting as workers, but as something else.

Wittig brings an important critique to this section of Marx by pointing out how women are made invisible in the Marxist narrative of class struggle. "[F]or the Marxists women *belong* either to the bourgeois class or to the proletariat class, in other words, to the men of these classes. In addition, Marxist theory does not allow women any more than other classes of oppressed people to

constitute themselves as historical subjects, because Marxism does not take into account that a class consists of individuals one by one.” (18) Considering the role of the masculine pronoun in Marx's class division, we see that both sides are male. The Marxist narrative abstraction of the worker is overdetermined by gender hierarchy.

Seeing not just the commonality of economic oppression in Marx's narrative of the worker, Wittig suggests an alternative, “The transformation of economic relationships will not suffice. We must produce a political transformation of the key concepts, that is of the concepts which are strategic to us.” (30) The “we” here refers ostensibly to women, but it could refer to any commonality made invisible under the binary class division. There are a multiplicity of commonalities and narrative understandings among and between the individuals who constitute classes of worker and bourgeois, but these shared narratives are hidden in an economic split. Bourgeois women may not hold in common the economic oppression of the proletariat, but they are members of an oppressed group which holds their domination at the hands of men in common. With an intersectional analysis, we see that each individual fight against oppression will take a different character, since different hierarchies and overdeterminations will intersect uniquely on each person. And yet there remains the call to unity in Wittig's work, an acknowledgement that class (beyond but not excluding the economic) consciousness is a precondition for struggle and that we require terms in which to invoke this class, terms that must be re-imagined and re-constituted out of what exists in its overdetermined state. “This real necessity for everyone to exist as an individual, as well as a member of a class, is perhaps the first condition for the accomplishment of a revolution, without which there can be no real fight or transformation. But the opposite is also true; without class and class consciousness there are no real subjects, only alienated individuals.” (19) We are made comprehensible, not only to others, but to ourselves as reproduced through the abstraction of class. There is a tension here between the reductive nature of class as an abstraction and the fact that this process involves the formation of a subjectivity based around commonalities. If classes necessarily

exclude but are the only path to a realization of collective subjectivity, can we have a truly common subject? This draws us back to the question of repressed subjectivities that are the engines of narrative change. If we can only understand them as (necessarily exclusive) classes, where can we find the collapse of difference promised in the Marxist narrative of class struggle? What do we call the common relation beneath overdetermined divisions and hierarchies?

## **They The People**

In the search for a universal subject, it might be useful to look at the quasi-universal narrative of “the people” to see how its history demonstrates the possibility of counter-juxtapositions as well as the concept's ultimate insufficiency. Margaret Canovan in her history of the abstraction “the people” points to the failure of Marx's worker/bourgeois counter-juxtaposition, “[T]he populist social radicalism of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth centuries was addressed (as in earlier times) to a wide and loosely defined constituency. Instead of Marx's new industrial proletariat, a more varied collection of artisans, craftsmen and others were attracted to radical groups that used the broad and inclusive discourse of 'the people.’” (*The People*, 70). The counter-narrative of the worker is insufficiently inclusive to reflect the counter-juxtaposition of collective political action. “The people” is here an abstraction that supposedly stretches to include all individuals within a state and is in fact the basis for the state's authority. Canovan draws out the history of the abstraction, pointing to how it was first used to justify royal power (The King embodies the will of the people) and then to dismantle that authority (Rule for the people, by the people). These changes come about not through an argued-over official definition or legislation, but by a counter-juxtaposition between the state and those individuals who comprise it. Canovan points to concrete popular action as the cause of these historical shifts in the abstraction and finds herself unable to describe “the people” as only an abstraction. The concrete actions of individuals (of course only analyzed as a group) for Canovan makes “the people” real as well as abstract. She

writes, “The conjunction of unity and plurality within the tradition is striking, creating an impression that the sovereign people is *us* here and now as well as being a powerful, immortal, authoritative body of which we are members.” (93) We recognize this tension as the dialectic between the abstract and the concrete, “the people” is in a continual state of becoming and so are the individuals thus described. The author loses sight of the concrete nature of any abstraction; a dialectical view allows “the people” to be abstract without disallowing instances of the concrete. The abstraction reproduces the individuals as “people” while concrete bodies and their actions/juxtapositions form the material basis for the abstraction. If Canovan is not prepared to point to the dialectical nature of the people, she readily admits the concept's dynamism. “[P]olitics in general – modern democratic politics in particular – is characterized by openness and contingency; by 'events', including ... the unexpected mobilization of individuals into powerful groups ... There features are mirrored in the openness of 'the people', which reflects the potential for commonplace individuals to come together into a political body and generate power where there was none before.” (140-1) Here is the openness that Marx's terminology lacked, an abstraction with bounds untied to specific class interests.

Before anyone starts painting banners, we must investigate the plot of “the people.” The term is nominally open and Canovan points to its historical dynamism as evidence, but an acknowledgement of its own instability is not sufficient for the universal subject we seek. What commonalities among “the people” have *not* been subject to negotiation? Clearly the composition of the set of people has changed over time through the exposure of repressed commonalities. If we look at the people in the United States, it certainly changed with the State's admission that black people were people and not property. If we see the people in the U.S. as those holding popular sovereignty in common, as Canovan does, then the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment nearly doubled the size of the people. Even if membership in the people was only possessed by some, it was common to all, subject to constant struggle and negotiation. When women took action as a

class for the right to vote in the U.S., they were setting their bodies in juxtaposition to the state as political actors, the very juxtaposition the state denied. One could argue that, in effect, they expanded the abstraction before they were officially admitted as members of the sovereign voting people.

Canovan devotes an entire chapter to the people's relationship to the state and it deserves some attention. One argument against “the people” as a universal subject is that it is tied inextricably to the nation. In this view, the people have a permanent juxtaposition to the nation, which, as long as we are not governed by robots, always separates individuals into members of the government and not. This division would create differential class interests between the two groups, and send us quickly back to the world of overdetermined classes and hierarchy. Canovan spends a number of pages arguing that a non-national people is possible and avoids the dangers of chauvinism that comes with *Volk*-ish nations. She writes, “Before the era of nation-states there were already such peoples in existence, if mostly on a small scale. It may be, therefore, that the coincidence of people and nation has been a temporary phase in political development, one that is now coming to an end. ... Might there be both a need and an opportunity to exercise political will and to build polities and peoples that transcend nations and reach out to humanity?” (51) If the people can overthrow their governments – as Canovan points out they have in a number of places and times – then it follows that the relationship between the people and the nation is variable. The people need not exclude individuals not recognized by the state since, as in the case of the suffragettes, the abstraction is common to those outside the bounds of recognized citizenship. In the case of Athenian democracy, we have a people (*demos*) without the existence of any institution called “the state” distinct from the members of the society.

The question now is whether there is a class of individuals excluded by the abstraction of “the people.” Does the establishment of the people create a division of class interests? Would a universal “people” be truly universal? Canovan's description of the bounds of the people is

relatively expansive; she points to the virtual political impossibility of a global people, but makes clear that it would not violate the bounds of the abstraction. Even still, there is a specificity to Canovan's conception involving not the people's relationship to the state, but their relationship to each other. The people is related inextricably in Canovan's formulation to notions of sovereignty and governance. The role (or character) of the people is the conference of legitimate authority, individuals are members as long as they delegate. The people may not necessarily create a division between those recognized by the state and those not, but it does create the governing and governed (as well as the ungovernable). With this class division, distinct interests emerge, and with them, overdetermined abstractions/narratives. With the legitimation of authority and power, there exists a differential between those receiving/exercising and those granting/exercised-upon. The differential then manifests in the governing class's ability to propagate advantageous abstract narrative understandings. We can imagine one common interest of the governing class would be the success of their children. Using their power position, the governing class has the ability to propagate narrative understandings and corresponding social juxtapositions that enable the achievement of this class interest. Indeed, if we look at the history of popular societies, we see a commonality in the societal position of governing-class progeny. Whether by narratives of monarchical blood lines, natural hereditary social hierarchies, or the privileged as meritocrats, the children of the governing classes have been privileged.

We knew from the beginning that “the people” is abstract and therefore by Althusser's formulation, overdetermined; it reflects class interests. This happens both in the way the abstraction is used within political discourse, as when politicians declare the people to be sick and tired of something or other, and at the juxtaposition between the governing and the governed that is its very root. The abstraction of the people has certainly been useful despite its ideological constraints. All abstractions in an unequal society are overdetermined, but that does not make them useless in undermining dominant structures. However, the people still creates differential class interests



through the division between the governing and the governed. We can also imagine those who could be excluded from the people based on their refusal or inability to delegate, to submit to the grasping together into a polity. The undocumented migrants and the lunatics, the children, the imprisoned, and animals, all of these groups are excluded from the people as a unity. They remain ungrasped because, insofar as they do not share in common the delegation of authority to the governing classes, they are ungovernable, at least not democratically.

We can see how the ungovernable are excluded from overdetermined societal narratives by looking at any invocation of “the people.” When polling firms call for a public opinion sample, they do not include inmates. Plenty of politicians have spoken about the people's feelings on taxes, but few on the people's desire for increased allowance. Our narrative understandings of the ungovernable justify their exclusion, e.g. “Children are too irresponsible to make choices that affect the larger world,” or “Prisoners have been removed from society because of their crimes and have lost the right to participate in governance.” The overdetermined narratives classify their interests as personal or developmental rather than political. The ungovernable are not permitted class interests, only the desires of alienated individuals. The interests of the people are incorporated into the political system, but no structure addresses children's common desire for more recess. Taking this line of thought to its limit, we see how notions of the people based on the common delegation of legitimate authority cannot accommodate all individuals. Asking a toddler to vote makes about as much sense as asking a squirrel. This does not mean, despite the dominant narrative understandings, that they do not share interests expressed in other ways. The queer liberationist group Bash Back! put out a call for actions in trans-species solidarity with Tillikum, the Orca who attacked and killed a Sea World trainer in February, 2010. By classifying the whale's attack an act of social war, Bash Back! politicized what was otherwise seen as an apolitical event, closer to an assembly-line accident than an inmate or slave uprising. Cruelty to animals is a political issue, yet the affected parties are unable to express themselves politically as they are not included in the people.

This seems not to be an issue of abstract scope, the ungovernable cannot be contained because definitionally the split between governing and governed creates another division between the people and the ungovernable. The collapse of difference that can happen with a revolution of the people still cannot destroy difference flowing from the commonalities that shape the abstraction itself – the ability/willingness to delegate one's sovereignty. The people fails as a weapon at the outset through its division.

## **Beneath The People, The Multitude**

We need, then, an alternative to the people. Starting with division seems to invite problems from the outset. Instead, Paolo Virno suggests beginning with commonality,

“Even the many need a form of unity, of being a One. But here is the point: this unity is no longer the State<sup>33</sup>; rather, it is language, intellect, the communal faculties of the human race. The One is no longer a *promise*, it is a *premise*. Unity is no longer something (the State, the sovereign) towards which things converge, as in the case of the people; rather it is taken for granted, as a background or a necessary precondition. The many must be thought of as the individualization of the universal, of the generic, of the shared experience. This, in a symmetric manner, we must conceive of a One which, far from being something conclusive, might be thought of as the base which authorizes differentiation or which allows for the political-social existence of the *many* seen as being *many*. [Emphasis in original]” (*The Grammar of the Multitude*, 25)

The abstraction here is “the multitude” in opposition to “the people.” Individuals do not come together, as in the Canovan's work in which the people makes itself present, the multitude is there from the beginning. The shared experience here is the commonality between all individuals, not a division based on delegation of will. With the multitude, we start only with those things that are shared, the union of individuals is based on points of unity. A social-contract theorist like John Rawls starts from something like the multitude – for Rawls it is the original position, which demands a multitudinous subjectivity – but moves quickly to the agreement, a codification of the juxtaposition between the individuals based around the delegation of sovereignty. Thomas Hobbes

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33 Or the governing class in the absence of the State.

narrates this process in the story of the war by all against all and the coming together to form a people out of common fear and insecurity. It is then that a “people” is produced as such. The multitude exists a layer below, based upon commonalities existing beneath the division into governed and governing.

Virno writes that the multitude is indescribable under current understandings, which indicates to us that it represents a counter-juxtaposition to current social abstractions like “the people.” (24) In the multitude, we have the possibility of complete collapse to commonality, which, as we will see, better enables individuation. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt work in the same line as Virno in relating the multitude to liberation as distinct from emancipation. They write, “[W]hereas emancipation strives for the freedom of identity, the freedom to be *who you really are*, liberation aims at the freedom of self-determination and self-transformation, the freedom to determine *what you can become*. [emphasis in original]” (*Commonwealth*, 331) The expansion of “the people” to contain new groups over time is a function of emancipation, and it involves reclaiming some of the commonalities hidden in difference. To take the example once again of suffragettes, the fight for membership in the voting public is attempt to expand the understanding of the category to include women, allowing them to be fully citizens. In the case of gay marriage, we see same-sex couples struggle to expand the narrative understanding of marriage to include them. They wish to be considered *as they really are*, that is, as a married couple or a citizen. This argument is predicated on the “character” of these institutions going beyond formal legal recognition e.g. marriage is between two committed people who love each other, or a citizen is one who is actively engaged in the public life of one's nation. In this process the narrative setting itself (citizenship, voting) enlarges in scope and becomes more resilient to the rupturing effects of some supplementary juxtapositions. If the dominant narrative of marriage is able to absorb the shock of same-sex weddings, then it seems unlikely to collapse when other contradictions in its logic – long-time cohabitants for example, or non-romantic marriages – are exposed.

Liberation, on the other hand, involves the fight for the destruction of these dividing and overdetermined abstractions in order to make present base commonalities, the juxtaposition necessary for the emergence of the multitude as subject. This is not the refusal to see hierarchies of difference, such a move only hides the hierarchies that exist under layers of collective denial. Hardt and Negri use the example of revolutionary communism, “The primary object of class struggle, in other words, is not to kill capitalists but to demolish the social structures and institutions that maintain their privilege and authority, abolishing too, thereby, the conditions of proletarian subordination.” (332) Not the destruction of difference, therefore, but the destruction of hierarchies of difference. Liberationist social movements do not seek better conditions within existing divisions (e.g. higher wages, same-sex marriage), they seek the destruction of the divisions themselves. Liberation is then a confrontation with overdetermination, with hierarchies embedded in abstraction and narrative. The character of the multitude becomes clearer here, if all divisions create both class consciousness – the only path to revolution – and overdetermined narratives, how can we struggle against hierarchy and division itself? Almost any intersectional analysis of a social movement reveals the double-edged sword of class consciousness. Mainstream feminism movements for decades have ignored or downplayed the importance of race, class and sexuality. Bash Back! targets mainstream LGBT organizations like the Human Rights Campaign for their inattention to issues of intersectionality. No organization is safe from these kinds of critiques, and it might be the groups ostensibly devoted to totalist politics that are most guilty of affirming hierarchies.

And yet, since the confluences of oppression and privilege are so specific to the individual, it seems impossible to develop a class consciousness/class/class narrative able to fight all the battles at once without strengthening any existing hierarchies. The multitude is a consciousness of the many as many, and there are a corresponding multiplicity of struggles within the multitude itself. But what all the individuals – or “singularities” as Hardt and Negri write – share, what enables the multitude's process of becoming, are the base human commonalities from which we begin.

## Human Natures

Different theorists have very different conceptions of these base commonalities, and I will take from a few different ones. For both Virno as well as Hardt and Negri, the notion of “the common” becomes very important. Virno phrases it in terms of Marx's “general intellect,” the linguistic and behavioral acts that we hold in common, that is share/define, are what define the multitude. He points specifically to the feeling of “not feeling at home” as a shared experience of the post-Fordist multitude. (*Grammar*, 35) For Hardt and Negri, the common is biopolitical, including both the general intellect and what we could call the natural world. (*Commonwealth*, 171) These are things – I ought really say “everything” – to which every individual within the multitude has a common claim. These are different articulations of the same idea, that the commonalities shared/defined by all humanity are what defines the multitude as such.

Nina Power in a review of the contemporary literature of the multitude – including Virno, Hardt and Negri – concludes that visions of the multitude re-raise questions of human nature. “Virno posits that due to certain shifts in the nature of work, it is only now, when the differential traits of the species (i.e., that which separates us from other animals, namely verbal thought, the transindividual character of the mind, the lack of specialized instincts) are the 'raw material' of capitalist organization, that we can return again to the question of a politics of human nature. Thus the problem of the 'natural' emerges *contingently*, that is, at a certain historical moment, yet as if for the first time<sup>34</sup>.” This makes sense because we know we have access to notions of the human only as they are overdetermined by societal hierarchies and that supplementary narratives stretch back into history. In Plato's *Symposium*, Aristophanes begins his speech on love “Long ago, our nature was not the same as it is now, but quite different.” (22) Viewing human nature contingently as Power suggests allows us to name commonalities made present by the effects of current material relations.

Human nature, in light of contemporary organizations of labor, is something both new and

34 “Potentiality or Capacity? – Agamben's Missing Subjects.” *Theory and Event*. Vol. 13, Issue 1. 2010.

retroactive. Capitalism here begins to fulfill its self-destructive character by increasing reliance on the privatization of the commons. By profiting so directly off the commons, capitalism draws the commons to the forefront, exposing the privatization and the possibility of its reclamation.

Take Google, which encourages its employees to spend a lot of time on what was for a long time classified as avoidance of work: chatting with fellow employees, playing games and spending time on individual projects. What sounds like a lax work environment is actually the privatization of the general intellect. Previously, if a few employees bounce concepts off of each other and come up with a fantastic idea during time not spent “working,” that idea could turn into the newest start-up, perhaps more successful than the firm at which the founders were employed together. The realization that workers might be more productive when they are not working might be startling, but there are always ways to privatize. Google lists four things they do to “facilitate a motivated, inspired workforce: We work in small teams to promote spontaneity, creativity and speed. We listen to every idea, on the theory that any Googler can come up with the next breakthrough. We provide the resources to turn great ideas into reality. We offer our engineers '20-percent time' so that they're free to work on what they're really passionate about.<sup>35</sup>” This program works so well for Google precisely because the commons are so productive! Spontaneity, creativity, a disregard for hierarchy, independence, these are all elements of the commons brought to the forefront. To put it in the terminology I have used throughout the paper, the dynamic non-hierarchical juxtaposition of workers in order to maximize productivity is also the juxtaposition necessary to make present human commonalities and thus define the multitude. If this sounds like the capitalists have triggered an ancient curse, it is because the supplemental counter-narrative of the multitude stretches back in time. Virno puts it this way, “It is as if the root has risen to the surface, finally revealing itself to the naked eye. That which has always been true, is only now unveiled. The multitude is this: a fundamental biological configuration which becomes a historically determined way of being, ontology revealing itself phenomenologically.” (98) The multitude comes bearing its own history.

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35 <http://www.google.com/support/jobs/bin/static.py?page=about.html&about=eng>

We establish the (heavily contingent) notion of Power's human nature on commonalities across the base of humanity. As per earlier formulations, we know this process is anticonfluent, the commonalities are revealed through juxtaposition and difference. I discussed above how juxtaposition reveals commonalities of the post-Fordist multitude, but it might be worth looking at difference as well. Dialectically, differences produce commonalities, a process Jameson describes in his slogan “differences relate.” (*Jameson on Jameson*, 47). The commonalities only come through the juxtaposition if the subjects are juxtaposed in such a way that they can be contrasted, as elements in an anticonfluent literary work, in order to define a common narrative. The contingent human nature that Power describes is then a universalizing counter-narrative, defined anticonfluentally, reproducing the multitude as such. Instead of “nasty, brutish, and short,” we have “spontaneous, collaborative, and passionate,” which makes possible – Nay! Necessary! – a different kind of political organization.

I wish to approach the question of the political organization of the multitude by looking at this idea of human nature, specifically, how the narrative of human nature concerning “the people” differs from that of “the multitude.” I start here because it is where Hobbes starts, and if I wish to argue against the state – and I certainly do – I can think of no better place. Earlier I invoked the CliffsNotes version of Hobbes's idea, human nature is a condition of constant danger, the war of all against all. It is from this juxtaposition of human individuals that the common need for a state arises; the state is the institution that protects people from each other. Canovan writes about this as the moment of coming together, the formation of a people. But does the Hobbesian idea match the commonalities that define the human nature we've been discussing?

Think about how Google would work if its workers conformed to Hobbesian nature: engineers would never talk idly for fear of giving away useful ideas to an opponent, working on individual projects would be a big risk because blame could not be shifted in the event of failure. In short, Google's attempts at capitalizing on the common would have been unsuccessful. If firms

wanted to maximize worker effectiveness based on Hobbesian human nature, they would still conduct *Glengarry Glen Ross*-style steak-knife contests. But post-Fordist capitalism is based on a different narrative of human nature, a revolutionary narrative. Imagine a human nature that is as Google imagines it, “spontaneous, collaborative, and passionate.” Would creatures of this character engage in a war of all against all? Rather, the multitude – which is what we could call this pre-“people” – is most productive when juxtaposed anarchically.

If we take seriously the idea that the next breakthrough can come from “any Googler,” we recognize it as a statement about the common and hierarchy. Hardt and Negri recognize the dangers hierarchies pose for the common, “Hierarchies segment the common and exclude populations from it, disrupting the necessary forms of cooperation and communication.” (303) If the next great idea can come from anyone, then hierarchy severely limits the productivity of the common. I would like to point out here how, with only a few shifts in jargon, the quoted sentence above could easily come from a post-Fordist company manual. With this vision of human nature, the creation of a “people,” with its power differential between the governing and the governed and the resulting hierarchy, would be a destructive act, distorting the common while putting it into private hands. Without the hierarchy of governance, the multitude is composed anarchically. At the same time that hierarchies of governance would distort the common, privatization distorts as well, segmenting common relationships to resources and production by class. Badiou cites resistance to this Hobbesian idea of nature as one of the main tenets of his “Communist hypothesis.” He writes, “The prevalent pessimistic idea, which once again dominates our time, is that human nature is destined to inequality; that it’s of course a shame that this is so, but that once we’ve shed a few tears about this, it is crucial to grasp this and accept it.” (“The Courage of the Present”) Valuing a basic human equality presents for Badiou a yardstick by which to judge collective actions. The competitive based in the Hobbesian ideas is an obstacle to equality that can be overcome by conscious action.



## The Common At Work

\_\_\_\_\_ Joshua Ferris in his post-Fordist workplace novel *Then We Came To The End* demonstrates how the presence of the common in its privatization produces a multitudinal subjectivity. The narrator of the novel is first-person plural, a constellational “we.” This “we” is based not on a firm definition, but describes different commonalities between workers at an advertising firm at different times. After a prank, manager Lynn asks office gossip Benny who was responsible, Ferris writes, “It wasn't any on person, I don't think, [i]t was more of like a zeitgeist ... I don't have a name for you, [i]t was just something going around, a lot of people were talking about it.” (132) The lot of people are defined as the “we” based on their common relationship to the prank. Through post-Fordist office-work, which includes “non-work” like idle talking/prank-scheming, there is an acknowledgment of social production. When Lynn presses Benny for even one name, he concedes that he has many guilty names, but not *one* name. The one is not; the many is responsible only *as many*.

\_\_\_\_\_ Ferris's characters debate and define the limits of the “we” throughout the novel. There are times when the “we” is based on official hierarchies within the firm, other times based on gender or racial commonalities. It would be a stretch to call the narrator's point of view “common,” but the novel is useful because it describes a dynamic collective subjectivity. At one point, the collective narrator fumes at middle-manager Joe Pope's self-imposed separation from the group. “We had news for him. He was one of us whether he liked it or not. He came in at the same time every morning, he was expected at the same meetings, he had the same deadlines as the rest of us.” (261) The narrator recognizes that the post-Fordist office, characterized by collaborative work, reveals commonalities beyond official hierarchies. In Ferris's agency, the workers and Pope share common productive activities and therefore, in the narrator(')s(') indignant opinion, a subjectivity. It is not just that they all work together, but the particular ways in which post-Fordist collaboration manifests that the relations produce a collective subjectivity. These are Google-like meetings in

which anyone could have the next great idea, the deadline on projects are common because the project itself is common. The many as many of the sandlot is reborn in the post-Fordist office, albeit privatized. A failure to get a good idea for a pitch is a common office failure, not just of the office, but of each individual within it. Even if the common is segmented by privatization and the imposition of hierarchy, it is made present in its distortion. Ferris's characters do not show a lot of solidarity – forming no sort of organization to resist lay-offs – but the competition and rivalry are described as impediments to success. Workers are encouraged constantly to “get along” because their productivity depends on it. The damaging reversions to Hobbesian nature within the agency are related to division by hierarchy, e.g. the office's antagonizing of the aloof Joe Pope, and the precarity common to the lay-off-vulnerable non-management employees. One could read *Then We Came To The End* as a story of the contradictions within post-Fordism, or as Virno puts it the “communization of capital.” (*Grammar*, 110) The goal of using the productivity of the common is consistently undermined by the demands of its privatization. The novel ends with the dissolution of the “we” as a result of firings and lay-offs, a manifestation of post-Fordist precarity, and thereby ends the productive basis for the agency. The demand that workers produce commonly within a system of hierarchy becomes untenable. But within this process, a many-as-many emerges through juxtaposed commonalities.

Within *Then We Came To The End*, beneath the official hierarchies and privatization of the common, is a notion of non-representational democracy. In the conversation between Lynn and Benny discussed above, the act of comically framing Joe Pope for theft is an action of the many for which no representative can be held responsible. It is because the plot was formed commonly – even if individuals were more or less involved, their actions/inactions commonly shaped the incident – that Benny cannot single-out any single perpetrator. Because office pranks are elements of the common (“general intellect”) that are not productive (one might even say they are counter-productive), they are not subject in the same way to the segmenting effects of office hierarchies. No

manager or project-leader was given responsibility for the prank by the individuals, rather they acted socially to produce the prank as it occurred. The workers do not “come together” to form an acting body, they constitute one to begin with based on their commonalities. This is a non-representational vision of democratic action, in which the participants acknowledge the common nature of the action leaving a situation in which no individual can be said to be more responsible than any other.

The imposition of notions of personal responsibility onto collective action reveals the incompatibility of representational and non-representational democracy. There is something childish in Benny's refusal, he is like an adolescent refusing to take or assign responsibility. I think this comparison is actually very useful in envisioning democracy of the common. When an adult catches a group of young people commonly breaking a rule, e.g. eating stolen cookies or using illegal narcotics, the predictable question “Who's responsible?” and the equally predictable blank response indicate different conceptions of collective organization. Hierarchies manifest within friend-groups in different ways, e.g. the friend who owns the car may have more say over a given night's events, but they are generally non-representationally democratic. The example of young people works so well because they are an ungovernable class in that they are societally deemed unfit to delegate their authority. Instead a youth's, parent(s), guardian(s), or the state hold(s) that delegation until the youth's entrance into “the people.” The same conception works for prison riots, – assuming a lack of hierarchical organizations – the prisoners are deprived of their ability to delegate their will and so they act, even when forming collective actions like riots, as commonly responsible individuals. Each member's actions contribute to the common act or narrative of the group, the many as many constitute an irreducible subject.

This discussion of representation clarifies the importance of the sections above about the construction of abstraction. Representation involves the division between the representative and the represented, between the material base and the pure instance. In that transfer of

agency/desire/sovereignty/power from the latter to the former involves a differentiation of responsibility. The representative is responsible because the representative bares responsibility for the whole. Non-representative democracy then involves the maintenance of the common as such, not in its division or segmentation. With irreducibly common production comes irreducibly common responsibility. It may be simple to see how a group could commonly create a snowball fight, but it seems a little more difficult to imagine a social movement that does not involve the coming together and the formation of a popular will.

When we describe a social movement in the terms of the multitude, we must be aware of its nature. When we wish to describe the nature of an abstraction without representation, we look to the commonalities within its material base, which is an anticonfluent process that involves the relation of difference. Only when we juxtapose a variety of individual struggles against hierarchy, do the commonalities and the potential character of an anti-hierarchical movement of the multitude become apparent. When looking for commonalities within struggles against hierarchy, Hardt and Negri look to identity politics. They assert that although struggles against racial, gender, and class oppression are different in a variety of very important ways, they share important commonalities that allow us some view of a common fight. (340) This translation process, as they deem it, or relation through difference, occurs within any individual organization or movement as well as between them. Individuals juxtapose their struggles with each other and through the articulation of commonalities, an abstraction of a movement is revealed. Of course these abstractions are overdetermined and an organization with an official line never matches exactly the desires of each of its members. A movement of the multitude, on the other hand, defies representation and thus its co-ordinated action is based on contingent commonalities. The goal is not to force individuals into a mode of representation, but to enable the discovery of commonalities within their struggles and desires. Hardt and Negri suggest the multitude moves like a centipede, legs relying on each other to continue in the same direction. I propose that the multitude moves like a riot, no front or back, but a

set of dynamic, negotiated commonalities relative to each other. A riot is acephalous, headless, but instead deliberates its movement based on the actions of individuals. Rioters' relation to their environment ceases to be regulated by the law and becomes subject to common negotiation; whether to dance, climb, or burn is up to them. This all seems very individual, but one person burning a trash can is called arson, not rioting. The key here is the movement of a decentered collective subject, where no individual can stand for the whole, but rather the whole refers to a series of dynamic relationships, a juxtaposition.

### **The Disaster Of Everyday Life**

We now have a better idea of the character of the multitude, it exists toward self-realization, which is the reclamation of the physical and intellectual common. The relationship here between the common as described by Hardt and Negri and the role of commonalities in the process of abstraction is important. The common, whether physical or intellectual, describes not things, but relationships. There is no “common” without a “common to.” The general intellect is characterized by its commonality; without common contribution, it ceases to exist as such. The physical common seen in terms of production is reflective of common relationships as well; gold may exist, but it only exists as a resource within narratives of (social) production. The multitude is defined by the discovery and reclamation of the common, so it is successful in rupturing hierarchy to the degree that it is made present. This link between the production of the multitude as subjectivity and reclamation of the common is what causes GiGi Roggero to write, “[F]rom the perspective of the common, struggles over the production of subjectivity are simultaneously struggles against exploitation.” (“Five Theses on the Common”) The production of a common subjectivity requires a “commoning” of the means of production. In *Then We Came To The End*, we see how the division of hierarchy both local (management) and global (structures of post-Fordist capitalism) holds the agency back from realizing the productive power of the common. Divisions made by necessarily

exclusive processes of coming-together restrict commonalities and prevent the emergence of a common subjectivity.

We see in Virno's discussion of post-Fordism that contemporary capitalism involves the realization of the common to maximum productivity without interfering in privatization. However, this juxtaposition makes possible through its lack the counter-juxtaposition of the common. As Marx saw capitalism as a necessary step in the destruction of class society, post-Fordism seems a necessary step in the realization of the common. The transition is so important because of the revision of the human narrative involved; a Hobbesian narrative of humanity could never involve an enduring destruction of hierarchy. But the exposure of the general intellect in its privatization can serve as a base commonality from which to realize the multitude. Virno writes, "The public intellect ... which appears in the post-Ford world as a mere resource of production, can constitute a different 'constitutional principle'; it can overshadow a *non-state public sphere*. The many, in as much as they are many, use the publicness of the intellect as their base or pedestal: for better or for worse. [emphasis in original]" (42) It is important here to distinguish between the general and public intellects as Virno uses the terms. The public intellect is the privatized intellectual common (or the general intellect), that which corresponds to the divided "people" rather than the multitude. Yet it still provides a base, or a narrative in whose emplotment there exists the presence of meaningful absence. It is in these absences that the possibility of the general intellect exists within the public intellect.

The appearance of commonality is made possible with the destruction of traditional divisions. That is, the juxtaposition of individuals in terms of their commonalities as such counters dominant juxtapositions that relate them in terms of class, race, gender, etc. hierarchies. When we take juxtaposition as the place of intervention in the production of overdetermined abstractions/narratives, it becomes simpler to understand the character (in MacIntyre's narrative sense) of the multitude. Post-Fordism is important because it devotes itself to destroying divisions

in accordance with its narrative of productivity. If people are more productive when they are able to collaborate about their passions without strict formal hierarchies, if more division than necessary to maintain class order are unproductive, then the most successful firms will be the ones who break down all but the essential hierarchies<sup>36</sup>. It is in the breakdown of hierarchy, and resulting juxtaposition based on human commonality, which constitutes the multitude. We can look for corroborating evidence for this thesis in situations where hierarchies and institutions that keep them in place collapse.

Rebecca Solnit sees disaster situations as raising important questions of the individual and the collective. In *A Paradise Built In Hell*, her book investigating the behavior of groups in reaction to crises, Solnit develops a narrative of human nature exposed in disaster in line with that of the multitude instead of the traditional Hobbesian notion of war in the absence of structure. By looking at affected individuals' collective action in a wide variety of disaster situations, from 9/11 to Katrina to the Mexico City earthquake, Solnit builds an anticonfluent counter-narrative understanding to notions of widespread panic in the event of institutional collapse. Instead, she suggests that the social juxtapositions provoked by disasters reveal great possibility and the privatization and divisions that distort it.

“[B]ecause you will not care for me, I cannot care for you. I will not feed you because I must hoard against starvation, since I too cannot count on others. Better yet, I will take your wealth and add it to mine – if I believe that my well-being is independent of yours or pitted against yours – and justify my conduct as natural law. If I am not my brother's keeper, then we have been expelled from paradise, a paradise of unbroken solidarity.

Thus does everyday life become a social disaster. Sometimes disaster intensifies this; sometimes it provides a remarkable reprieve from it, a view into another world for our other selves. When all the ordinary divides and patterns are shattered, people step up – not all, but the great preponderance – to become their brothers' keepers. And that purposefulness and connectedness bring joy even amid death, chaos, fear, and loss. Were we to know and believe this, our sense of what is possible at any time might change ... Horrible in itself, disaster is

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36 This is not to say that post-Fordist capitalists are devoted to the destruction of all but economic hierarchy. To pretend that economic class hierarchy is maintained separate from other forms of oppression and division would be foolish. Rather, the profit motive pushes firms to break down divisions on the basis of which economic class division are based.

sometimes a door back into paradise, the paradise at least in which we are who we hope to be, do the work we desire, and are each our sister's and brother's keeper.” (*A Paradise Built In Hell*, 3)

The paradise Solnit describes is compatible with the vision of the multitude developed so far. The breakdown of division is necessary to its realization, and disaster does not create the commonalities, but exposes them. Solnit poses the Hobbesian narrative as a central divisive factor not in disasters, but in every day life. Disasters provide for a view of a different juxtaposition, and it is in these glimpses that Solnit sees revolutionary potential. The power of the common is such that it provides joy in the worst crises, so powerful that disasters can serve as a *reprieve* from the everyday disaster of hierarchy.

The narrative Solnit constructs poses disturbing questions; if the reclamation of the common involves the destruction of the structure of division, then does paradise require hell? And if so, then what does that make those of us who would destroy hierarchy and uncover the multitude? If we think of “hell” as involving massive death and despair, then I do not think the relationship works that way, but if we associate the hellish with the destruction of the dominant order, then the multitude is indeed a hell-beast. Hardt and Negri describe the hellish aspects of a revolution toward the common, “Don't try to save yourself – in fact, your *self* has to be sacrificed! ... Abolition also requires the destruction of all the institutions of the corruption of the common we spoke of earlier, such as the family, the corporation, and the nation. This involves an often violent battle against the ruling powers and also, since these institutions in part define who we now are, an operation surely more painful than bloodshed. Revolution is not for the faint of heart. It is for monsters. You have to lose who you are to discover what you can become. [emphasis in original]” (340) The language in this passage fits well with Solnit's comments about a paradise in which we can be who we hope to be, both see the revelation of potential in the destruction of existing structures. A counter-juxtaposition of society involves a counter-juxtaposition of the self in relation to the new world; a society that operated according to mutual aid would produce a different narrative of human nature



than that of our current society. These other possible selves that Solnit describes are dialectically tied to another possible society. We see ourselves reproduced in terms of a counter-narrative about humanity, and we understand ourselves as individuals in common relation to each other and the world, as members of the multitude. This no process of rebirth, but a recognition of the self as a dynamic abstraction dialectically related to social juxtaposition. Counter-juxtapositions based on the common can produce glimpses at the subject of the multitude.

## **A War of Juxtaposition**

| \_\_\_\_\_ I want to take this final section to make use of all these ideas. I have not had opportunity to describe well enough the consequences of hierarchy and overdetermination, but I hope the reader understands references or examples not just as clarifying exercises, but as instances that commonly include a struggle against real pain and suffering. Although heavily theoretical language is useful for describing ideas that are structurally excluded from public discourse, it can sometimes conceal the human stakes of a radical project. Solnit helps clarify the struggle against hierarchy with her idea of the “disaster of everyday life,” social divisions and the institutions that help structure them are so destructive that we feel joyous at their absence even in the face of catastrophic disaster. The disaster of everyday life is that the Hobbesian logic of the market sets people to gain by each other's losses and humans have proven highly adept at disadvantaging each other.

| \_\_\_\_\_ The struggle against hierarchy is uphill, but becomes more realistic when the common is present in its privatization. The challenge, as it was for Marx, is to change the narrative character of individuals, which involves, as per the discussions above about the formation of narratives, changing the juxtaposition of people, to their institutions and to each other. If we think about the history of protest movements, what are political actions but counter-juxtapositions? When protesters march on the White House, they wish to counter the juxtaposition of the government in

control of “the people” with a juxtaposition of “the people” in control of the government. These are exercises ultimately in the positioning of bodies. The march on the seat of power is a reminder of revolutions past, the seizing of the power itself need not happen in a democracy because the people have it to delegate in the first place.

\_\_\_\_\_ The counter-juxtaposition yields a two-fold understanding: the narrative of a people opposed/in favor of Policy X and a government controlled by the people. At least, that is how it is supposed to work. In *John Henry Days*, Whitehead tells of J.'s college activism, “That April J. enlisted in the takeover of the Dean's Office to protest the lack of funds for the Afro-Am Department. It was an annual event, as much a token of spring as the cadre of fertilizer sprayers who roamed the Quad grass in plastic masks. The students filed a permit to take over the Dean's Office, and the Dean took a few days off to go fishing until the university sent the customary 'let's open talks' letter to the students inside, who were pretty sick of each other after three days of sundry privation.” (326) We see here how dominant narratives can absorb those counter-narratives that pose a threat. The mock revolution of protest becomes a citizen's duty in democracy, something like a more intense form of voting. Protesting is re-grasped as a simultaneous affirmation of the government's authority and fairness. *They even let their citizens protest!* Resistance by the people as such validates the division between the governing and the governed and ultimately affirms the power of the State. Similarly, protests against corporations by potential consumers validates the privateness of their enterprise. *It's their right to protest just like it's our right to sell sneakers.* The narratives of protest are, in Hardt and Negri's terminology, not liberating but emancipatory. To take Whitehead's example, occupying the Dean's office as such and issuing demands maintains the power hierarchy between governing and governed. But what alternatives exist?

\_\_\_\_\_ In the past year, students at public universities in California have been critiqued extensively for what boils down to the incomprehensibility of their actions in resistance to budget cuts. Students across the state occupied buildings not as possessions to use as leverage toward the

achievement of demands, but as elements of the physical common, as productive resources. Filling an auditorium with people studying, playing music, or dancing may not seem like much of a direct action, but it is the counter-juxtaposition between the individuals and the space that is threatening. Occupation can be an act of reclamation, whereby the physical common is produced as such. It is because reclamation is incomprehensible within narratives of private/public property that these occupations have been misunderstood. The occupation is not a means to an ends, it is its own ends for as long as the counter-juxtaposition holds. Actions of this sort inevitably come into confrontation with State power, which forces the question of privatization, with the contested resource, either privatized for the people as represented through the State, or held by the insurgents. The youths of Greece who battle with police for the streets cause us to ask, *If the streets are public, why do they have to fight for them?* Counter-juxtapositions of reclamation reveal public property as segments of the privatized common. In the midst of a riot or an occupation, the public is revealed to be the less private.

\_\_\_\_\_ Occupations and riots share more in common with works of art than with traditional protests. Art, novelist and essayist Jeanette Winterson writes, is about the revelation of possibilities hidden by the every day. To offer counter-juxtapositions is to point to that whose absence exists as a lack in dominant narratives. Winterson writes, “The realist (from the Latin *res* = thing) who thinks he deals in things and not images and who is suspicious of the abstract and of art, is not the practical man but a man caught in a fantasy of his own unmaking ... A lover of objects and of objectivity, he is in fact caught in a world of symbols and symbolism, where he is unable to see the thing in itself, as it really is, he sees it only in relation to his own story of the world.” (*Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, 143) Winterson does not posit an idealism in line with her use of “in itself” but associates reality with potentiality. (145) Art is the act of enlarging possibilities, which makes it a threat to entrenched narratives. As Winterson puts it, “The rebellion of art is a daily rebellion against the state of living death routinely called real life.” (108) Similarly, the occupations in

California have presented a potential university, a glimpse at those possibilities that have seemed foreclosed by powerful structures. Occupations provides this glimpse not simply through spectacle, although barricaded doors and dramatic police encounters draw attention, but through a counter-juxtaposition, not just of visible bodies, but of productive capacity or labor power.

\_\_\_\_\_ A dialectical mode of analysis can make the place of action difficult to find. With so many circling processes, the reader is sometimes left standing at a revolving door, unsure when to take a step forward. To put this metaphor to work, what in all of the concepts discussed involves an actual step? We know we do not have access to the concrete, or else a revolutionary change-of-self would be as easy as a diet. Juxtaposition is the mediating term between the concrete and the abstract, as understood narratively. To put this in social terms, an arrangement of concrete individuals produces the abstractions and narratives through which it is understood. Unequal arrangements produce overdetermined abstractions and narratives, which in turn, reproduce the juxtaposition as both ideological and comprehensible. The problem with the counter-juxtapositions of protests is not that some advance in State tactics has made resistance impossible, it is that the counter-juxtaposition offered has been incorporated into the dominant narrative understanding, it is no longer counter-. The view of society produced by street protests, at least in the United States, is not new, it no longer reveals possibility, but is instead an acting-out of pre-assigned roles. The protester becomes a symptom of the State in control, the malcontent character within the narrative of liberal capitalist democracy.

\_\_\_\_\_ One protests to motivate someone else to do something, what would it be called to do it oneself? A counter-juxtaposition based on human commonalities renders the questions of demands and protest moot. After all, as the multitude is unrepresentable, there is no one in particular from whom it makes sense to demand concessions. This makes it sound as if I advocate the privatization of protest, that collective action be reduced to individual choices, an idea of freedom based ultimately in consumption. But what makes the juxtaposition of the common so threatening

and far from atomized is the shift in relations. Reclamation is the process of creating the common as such and I should call it what it is: a seizure of the means of production. But as compelling as old phrases are, this is a different kind of seizure, not for, but only from. In the absence of forced privatization in reaction to State force, there is no need to take possession of the liberated buildings or intellectual common, there is only to put them to use.

\_\_\_\_\_ The multitude, or rather the shadow of its potential, shifts constantly, maintaining a common relationship to resources. In Berkeley, students studied in occupied Wheeler Hall, but the neighborhood's homeless also came inside to find a safe place to sleep. There may be a world of difference between students at the University of California Berkeley and the homeless of Telegraph Ave., but they share a common relationship to the buildings under the counter-juxtaposition. The common is a site of struggle, its character shifting according to the actions and desires of individuals. Common space is negotiated and remains always in a process of becoming. Where commentators have contextualized occupations as protests, they have judged based on superficial aesthetic similarities. Both have involved banners and the vision of a different future, but their relations to power are fundamentally different. As a counter-narrative to property, the common is incomprehensible alongside it. And yet, as small populations reject protest in favor of reclamation, we see the becoming of a narrative. The counter-juxtaposition of an instance of reclamation does not render itself comprehensible, rather it is made comprehensible *as* reclamation through its juxtaposition with other instances. Any individual instance risks the fate of Jurgis, suffering alone, incomprehensible in terms that could lead to a positive change in structural circumstances. Student occupations, if not grasped with similar instances in other settings, could be reduced to a critique solely of the education system, or even worse, examples of the “follies of youth.” The creation of a universalizing narrative requires a diversity of instances.

Both Solnit and Jameson see utility in the idea of utopia, and describe our access to it in the same language. Jameson writes, “It would be best, perhaps, to think of an alternate world – better to

say the alternate world, our alternate world – as one contiguous with ours but without any connection or access to it. Then, from time to time, like a diseased eyeball in which disturbing flashes of light are perceived or like those baroque sunbursts in which rays from another world suddenly break into this one, we are reminded that Utopia exists and that other systems, other spaces, are still possible.” (*Valences*, 612) Solnit: “But what if paradise flashed up among us from time to time – at the worst of times? What if we glimpsed it in the jaws of hell? These flashes give us, as the long ago and far away do not, a glimpse of who else we ourselves may be and what our society could become.” (*Paradise*, 9) In both works, these potentialities “flash,” only “glimpsed” for a moment: another world is possible. These are glimpses of counter-juxtapositions, of other arrangements between individuals and their common institutions and resources. If we conceive of society as a constellation in Benjamin's terms, then these glimpses are of fireworks, different juxtapositions that require no more than the stars we already have. It is then the job of those in radical opposition to hierarchy to set off fireworks until we move the stars.

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