Refiguring Class: The Precariat in Contemporary
Writing About Britain

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This thesis is dedicated to the people who have lived their lives, in relative anonymity, and sow seeds, and then sit back and watch with great satisfaction as the apple tree blossoms, knowing full well that they will not taste its fruit.

Acknowledgments

A research project is a collective endeavour. It would not initially appear so – because of the demand on doctoral researchers to submit a piece of work that contributes, on a strictly individual basis, something to knowledge – but it is undeniably the case. Recommendations of books, articles, and other useful academic sources; time spent in corridors, in coffee shops, and in pubs, sharing knowledge, ideas, and underdeveloped hunches, as well as offering a generous ear or two that considers initial ideas and allows for significant intellectual improvement; joyous moments of relaxation and renewal, allowing for the project to tick on subconsciously. I am indebted to the people who have gifted their time and – whether realising it – helped this project to develop into something I hope is worthwhile.

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Abstract

This thesis is about social class in post-2008 writing about Britain. Focusing on the work of several contemporary writers – including John Lanchester, Mohsin Hamid, and Ali Smith – the thesis seeks to examine the ways in which neoliberalism as an economic, cultural, social and political formation produces a new class subject: the precariat. The condition of precarity has received some attention in literary studies, but this thesis offers a theorisation of the constitutive form the character type of the precariat might take in seven main texts. The purpose of this, therefore, is to posit a revitalisation of class analyses in studies of contemporary literature.

After providing a theoretical mapping of neoliberalism, class, and the precariat across several disciplines in the Introduction, Chapter One interrogates Lanchester's *Capital* (2012), arguing that its formal qualities both reflect the cultural concept of the classless society and anticipate its fragmentation into the precariat. The novel's conclusion with the financial crisis as a moment of rupture signals the necessity of the subsequent chapters, which serve as literary case studies of each

character type. Chapter Two reads the protagonist of Paul Ewen's *Francis Plug: How To Be A Public Author* (2014) as a millennial by tracing the text's focus on burnout, mental health, and the false promise of meritocratic ideals to identify his exploitation. Chapter Three focuses on Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2004) and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) and locates the figure of the migrant-refugee as characterised by a perennial mobility. Chapter Four examines Jonathan Coe's *Number 11* (2015) and identifies its engagement with austerity as economic and cultural violence. Finally, Chapter Five offers a brief, concluding discussion that brings the threads of the thesis together by considering Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* (2017) and Ali Smith's *Spring* (2019) in relation to current class temporalities. Positioning precarity as existing in a 'hyper present', the thesis concludes by arguing the precariat is characterised by the post-crash cultural moment. Modulating Marxist and neo-Marxist discourses, these chapters offer as a starting point an account of the ways in which class formation affects the novel in the 2004-2019 period.

Contents

Bibliography 373

Introduction

Refiguring Class: Neoliberalism, Crisis, and the

Precariat

> Class distinctions do not die; they merely learn
> new ways of expressing themselves. […] Each
> decade we shiftily declare we have buried
> class; each decade the coffin stays empty.
>
> Richard Hoggart, 'Introduction', in George
> Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1989)

J.G. Ballard's 1975 novel *High Rise* depicts the

interactions of a newly established tower block in

London.[1] Its residents are not the feral inhabitants of

such accommodations so often depicted by popular

culture, who survive by claiming benefits and dealing

drugs; on the contrary, this block's inhabitants are a

new class of workers performing what was once

gleefully heralded as white-collar work: flight

attendants, vets, and home makers. These characters

constitute an array of professional workers, alongside

the homemakers and the children who populate this

community, and signify an emergent understanding

of labour, housing, and social relations in the mid-

1970s. More broadly, Ballard's text registers

something of the spirit of the mid-1970s, a

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[1] J.G. Ballard, *High Rise* (1975; London: Fourth Estate, 2014).

transitional cultural moment that observes the shift from postwar affluence enabled by social democracy to the entrenchment of the neoliberal ethic that became prominent in the 1980s. Despite a commitment to representing class conflict within the confines of the residency, and despite relying on the image of 1960s social housing in the form of the tower block, *High Rise* does not depict a class war between manual labourers and bosses. It is concerned with the representation of an incipient class of workers, emerging out of economic developments in postwar Britain, and of the interpersonal tensions that arise in the context of a residential high rise.

This representation of a group of middle-class characters, operating as proponents of class struggle, advances the idea of an irreconcilable tension between pre-conceived notions of middle-class mores and class warfare against itself. The ostensible middle-class subject as encapsulating contemporary class experience is at the forefront of this thesis and it will be argued that such a subject suggests a revival of the language of class in literary studies, rather than a retreat from it. In this context, Ballard's text is conceptually significant because it encapsulates the dynamics of shifting class relations and formations at

a transitional historical moment that is comparable with the cultural moment in which this thesis is interested. It emerges at a moment of economic, social, cultural and political realignment: the shift of the centre ground, the adoption (and abandonment) of new (and old) subjectivities and ways of structuring contemporary life in Britain. This shift is situated in terms of the economic, cultural, social and political formation of neoliberalism.

I gesture towards Ballard's here novel as an example of literature exploring this economic, cultural, social and political shift. *High Rise* is now over forty years old, and other fictions have consistently spoken to neoliberalism as it has evolved: Martin Amis's *Money* (1984), Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1990), and Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003) are notable examples.[2] U.S. fiction may have seemed to dominate in this regard, but British texts, such as Pat Barker's *Union Street* (1982) and *Blow Your House Down* (1984), Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), Jonathan

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[2] Martin Amis, *Money: A Suicide Note* (London: Penguin, 1984); Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987; London: Vintage, 2010); Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (1991; London: Picador, 2015); Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* (London: Scribner, 2003).

Coe's *What a Carve Up!* (1994), Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), Tim Lott's *Rumours of a Hurricane* (2002), also responded to the way in which neoliberalism recoded class formation to grapple with what labour the working classes were increasingly performing (if at all), what they did socially, and other questions relating to working-class ontologies.[3] Typically, literary criticism has focused on novels of underclass experience, such as Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993), James Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994), and Nicola Monaghan's *The Killing Jar* (2006), as a way of articulating working-class experience in the moment in which the rise of white collar work, as Ballard recognises, appears to erase working-class labour, and working-class social, cultural, and political experience.[4] This development emerges in a moment in which class is seen to be redistributed as part of a globalized system of material and

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[3] Pat Barker, *Union Street* (London: Virago, 1982); Pat Barker, *Blow Your House Down* (London: Virago, 1984); Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990; London: Faber & Faber, 2009); Jonathan Coe, *What a Carve Up!* (London: Penguin, 1994); Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Penguin, 2000); Tim Lott, *Rumours of a Hurricane* (London: Penguin, 2002).

[4] See Dominic Head, 'The Demise of Class Fiction', in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction* (Oxford; Blackwell, 2006), pp. 229-247. See also Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (London: Vintage, 1993); James Kelman, *How Late It Was, How Late* (London: Vintage, 1994); Nicola Monaghan, *The Killing Jar* (London: Vintage, 2007).

immaterial production, distribution, and consumption.[5] Novels such as David Dabydeen's *The Counting House* (1996) and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) are illustrative. They gesture to a hierarchised global system of economic – as well as cultural, social, and political – exchange and production.[6] If writing about class experience in Britain focuses on underclass experience it is because neoliberalism's reshaping of economic life appears to lift the working classes into an ambiguous class status between a working and a middle class.

Against the tendency in literary criticism to name class fiction as the novel of underclass experience, this thesis examines seven primary texts and proposes the class subject of the precariat.[7] It reads the precariat through the following novels: *Capital* (2012) by John Lanchester, *Francis Plug: How To Be A Public Author* (2014) by Paul Ewen,

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[5] For example, see Standing, *The Precariat*, p. 5; Manfred B. Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 38-42. John Smith's work is particularly instructive about the emergence of redistributed labour, although for him, it is 'outsourced.' See Smith, *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century* pp. 9-38, pp. 39-67. I emphasise this again in Chapter 1.

[6] David Dabydeen, *The Counting House* (1996; Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2005); Indra Sinha, *Animal's People* (London: Simon & Shuster, 2007).

[7] Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 72; Dominic Head, 'The Demise of Class Fiction', p. 246.

Transmission (2004) by Hari Kunzru and *Exit West* (2017) by Mohsin Hamid, *Number 11* (2015) by Jonathan Coe, *The Cut* (2017) by Anthony Cartwright and *Spring* (2019) by Ali Smith.[8] It borrows four key concepts from Guy Standing's conceptualisation of the precariat because his intervention is a provocation for revitalised readings of class characters. Apart from *The Cut*, and its explicit declaration as a production of patronage, it would be difficult to find a study that claimed the texts I am discussing as examples of class fiction.[9] But by using Standing's model, it is useful for identifying character types and formal qualities that borrow from, and contest, established character types in class fiction as more generally understood.

This character type resists historical conceptions of working-class labour, culture, and

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[8] John Lanchester, *Capital* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012); Paul Ewen, *Francis Plug: How To Be A Public Author* (Norwich: Galley Beggar Press, 2014); Hari Kunzru, *Transmission* (London: Penguin, 2004); Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West* (London: Penguin, 2017); Jonathan Coe, *Number 11* (London: Penguin, 2015); Anthony Cartwright, *The Cut* (London: Peirene, 2017); Ali Smith, *Spring* (London: Penguin, 2019).

[9] *The Cut*'s commissioning editor Meike Ziervogel writes as an editor's note in what is a remarkable intervention: 'The result of the EU referendum shocked me. I realized that I had been living in one part of a divided country. What fears - and what hopes - drove my fellow citizens to vote for Brexit? I commissioned Anthony Cartwright to build a fictional bridge between the two Britains that have opposed each other since the referendum day.' Page number not provided. This statement appears before the novel and after the publication information.

sociality – although this thesis also recognises that an essential continuity is necessary – and situates them instead in a twenty-first century context of neoliberal economic, cultural, social, and political reframing in Britain. It cannot be claimed here that the selection of these texts confirms the appearance of a new and congruent genre of fiction. Paul Ewen's novel, for instance, may be viewed as an outlier with its critique of contemporary economic life manifesting through the main character Francis Plug. Considered against the other works that may to greater and lesser extents be categorised as state of the nation novels, *How To Be A Public Author* provides a form that speaks to the condition of the precariat as the well-educated but existing in a confirmed state of precarity. The precariat is not a congruent group and is marked by educational, spatial, cultural and class differences. A congruent collection of texts therefore is not only undesirable but also methodologically unsound. As Erik Olin Wright observes, '[c]lass relations and the locations they determine do not, by themselves, define a social *group* with any real identity or cohesion.'[10]

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[10] Erik Olin Wright, *Understanding Class* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 95.

I have chosen three character types as the focus of this study: the millennial, the migrant-refugee, and the figure of austerity. These character types feature centrally in Standing's *The Precariat* (2011) and *A Precariat Charter* (2014).[11] In the first of these studies, Standing maps out the precariat as lacking seven securities attached to labourism, including work, job, and representation security. As Standing develops the idea of a precariat, three figures emerge as significant: the educated, the migrant, and the traditional working class, the latter notably left behind and subject or susceptible to right-wing populism.[12] These are the characters this thesis considers. Standing's concepts are explored in more detail later in this Introduction, but it is necessary to mention them now to identify the focus of this study and also to recognise the precariat as a class embodying tensions within it. As with Ballard's representation of intra-class warfare, the precariat may harbour its own internal tensions and animosities: the educated may scoff at the traditional worker, who in turn may see the migrant-refugee as

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[11] Guy Standing, *The Precariat* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011); Guy Standing, *A Precariat Charter* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

[12] Guy Standing, 'The Precariat and Class Struggle', *RCCS Annual Review*, 7 October 2015, 3-16 (pp. 7-9).

the cause of her problems. To recognise these tensions is essential since in carving out space in literary studies for an interrogation of the figure of the precariat, and to propose the character type of the precariat in these fictions, is to recognise the ways in which the precariat is not only a class-in-the-making, but also a genre-in-the-making.

The financial crisis of 2008 and the policy decisions that followed was an essential moment for the emergence of the precariat. This moment marks an unsettling of the economic, cultural, social and political landscape in twenty-first Britain. In literature, it also led to the emergence of new genres. As Katy Shaw notes, the financial crisis enabled – indeed, demanded – a subgenre of 'Crunch Lit' fictions, so-called 'Recessionista fiction.'[13] Shaw writes: 'Targeted at audiences who, post-crunch, have little sympathy for the shopaholic protagonists of chick-lit, the Recessionista more accurately represents the post-crunch reality experience of readers.'[14] The financial crisis – and the economic, social and political changes this event brought about – caused a microscope to be placed over

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[13] Katy Shaw *Crunch Lit* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 115-137.
[14] Shaw, *Crunch Lit*, p. 122.

neoliberalism and in turn, literary criticism reconceived pre-existing ideas about genre. As I will argue, the financial crisis may be perceived as a moment in which languages of class may be salvaged as well as reconfigured. The question is what form this criticism will take: to salvage class fiction might imply a simple return to the class fictions in the twenty-first century. This approach is tempting, but for class fiction to have longevity, literary criticism must look to the ways in which the novel responds to current class formation.

This class formation must be read in terms of the domination of neoliberalism over economics, cultural, and politics. As a handful of critics have noted, the financial crisis of 2008 was seen to represent the end of neoliberal supremacy.[15] Indeed, as Peck, Theodore, and Brenner note, soon after the crash, '[t]he free-market project is on the ropes. Never before has the question of neoliberalism's political, economic, and social role – culpability might be a better word – been debated with such

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[15] David Harvey, 'Is This Really the End of Neoliberalism?', *Counter Punch*, 13 March 2009, <http://tomweston.net/EndNeoLib.pdf> [accessed 4 July 2019]; Joseph Stiglitz in Nathan Gardels, 'Stiglitz: The Fall of Wall Street is to Market Fundamentalism What the Fall of the Berlin Wall Was to Communism', *Huffington Post*, 17 October 2008, <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/stiglitz-the-fall-of-wall_b_126911> [accessed 18 July 2019].

urgency, so globally, and in such a public manner."[16] Several monographs and edited collections have appeared since the financial crisis that focus on literature and neoliberalism, and charts literature that responds to finance and the financial crisis.[17] Critics who have written about post-crash writing and its social and economic significance have considered a range of texts – including *Cosmopolis* (2003) by Don DeLillo, *Capital* (2012) by John Lanchester, and *10.04* by Ben Lerner (2014).[18] Such texts have become a staple of literary criticism reacting to the financial crisis, and a handful of monographs have emerged responding to fiction that confronts this event. Katy Shaw's *Crunch Lit* (2015) and Arne de Boever's *Finance Fictions: Realism and Psychosis in a Time of Economic Crisis* (2018) are two fine examples. For de Boever, literature provides a realism capable of managing the complex agents of

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[16] Jamie Peck, Nik Theodore, Neil Brenner, 'Postneoliberalism and its malcontents', *Antipode*, 41 (s1) (2010), 94-116 (p. 94).
[17] Paul Crosthwaite, *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (eds), *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2017); Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl (eds), 'Neoliberalism and the Novel', *Textual Practice*, 29.2 (2015) [later published as: Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl (eds), *Neoliberalism and the Novel* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016)]; 'Genres of Neoliberalism,' *Social Text*, 115 (2013).
[18] DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*; Lanchester, *Capital*; Ben Lerner, *10.04* (London: Granta, 2015).

neoliberal capitalism – collaterised debt obligations, credit default swaps, and other advanced technological mechanisms that govern how finance operates.[19] For de Boever, then, the novel and particularly in its realist modes offer a formal complexity capable of grappling with elaborate financial instruments.

An excellent example of literary criticism that intervenes in the debate about the financial crisis, neoliberalism, and the novel is Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl's introduction to their special issue, 'Neoliberalism and the Novel.' Beginning with Zadie Smith's essay – 'Two Paths for the Novel' – published almost two months after Lehman Brothers' collapse, they claim 2008 as a significant moment for analyses of neoliberalism in relation to the novel, (re)asserting it as an apt form for dealing with the complexity of neoliberalism.[20] For Johansen and Karl, the novel is 'a thoroughly sociable genre', and it is this sociability – particularly under capital – that

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[19] Nicky Marsh, *Money, Speculation and Finance in Contemporary British Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2007); Shaw, *Crunch Lit*; Arne de Boever's *Finance Fictions: Realism and Psychosis in a Time of Economic Crisis* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018).

[20] Zadie Smith, 'Two Paths for the Novel', *New York Review of Books*, 20 November 2008, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2008/11/20/two-paths-for-the-novel/> [accessed 13 July 2009].

renders the novel an apposite form to explore the contemporary condition.[21] This condition is not composed of the same characteristics as liberal capitalism but as a starting point, Johansen and Karl note 'the novel's imbrication in and contiguity with the history of capitalism provides a unique occasion to similarly uncover and historicise the economic paradigms of the present.'[22] This view is central to the approach in this thesis, locating novels, character types, and critical material in a historical and cultural context to inform close readings. Johansen and Karl are interested in outlining neoliberalism's expansive qualities, as 'one logic, smeared across a bunch of discourses', as Jeffrey Nealon puts it.[23] This 'smearing' 'makes "neoliberal" a useful category and optic for analysis because the term reminds us that cultural forms generated under its auspices are predicated upon and presume the tropes of today's dominant political economy, without necessarily submitting to them.'[24] Confirming their understanding of the neoliberal novel as totalising

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[21] Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl, 'Introduction: reading and writing the economic present', *Textual Practice*, 29.2 (2015), 201-214 (p. 202).
[22] Johansen and Karl, 'Introduction', p. 204.
[23] Jeffrey Nealon, cited in Johansen and Karl, 'Introduction', p. 207.
[24] Johansen and Karl, 'Introduction', p. 207.

social – as well as economic and political – life, Johansen and Karl's method of analysis is compelling because it is expansive and deliberately slippery because neoliberalism is an evasive signifier.

This thesis will consider some novels that have already received critical attention on the financial crisis, such as Lanchester's *Capital*, but also under-explored texts in relation to this concept. For example, Ewen's *Francis Plug* has yet to receive critical attention, and my discussion of it in Chapter Two implies that it is at once a novel responding to the financial crisis and an example of a new form of class fiction. For Shaw, *Capital* speaks to a collective responsibility and texts responding to the financial crisis, such as *Capital*, 'offer a literary analysis of causes, events and blame that is profoundly plural.'[25] This theme locates Lanchester's novel in the cultural context of classlessness discourse. While Shaw's reading of *Capital* focuses primarily on the metropolitan space of London and the figure of the banker, I consider the novel as encapsulating the social multiplicity of the 'classless society' in a transitional social and cultural moment. Its multi-perspectival narrative follows several characters,

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[25] Shaw, *Crunch Lit*, p. 111.

giving each equal standing in respect to the other. The characters represented to which the text gives voice cut across gender, ethnic and national lines. By concentrating on an apparent shared economic experience, *Capital* enables an interrogation of economic simultaneity and invites explorations of social and cultural difference, characteristic of the moment I am describing.

Chapter One is a conceptual point of departure and the next three chapters all serve as literary case studies of different aspects of the precariat. Following the financial crisis, the amorphous middle with which Lanchester is concerned can be seen to break up. Journalistic accounts, for instance, identify the middle classes in Britain as disappearing, eroded by stagnating wages, as the economy recedes and only performs minimum levels of growth.[26] The middle class, central to the argument in Chapter One, is recognised as

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[26] Mohamed El-Erian, 'The middle is being squeezed – can it recover?', *Guardian*, 26 March 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/mar/26/middle-squeezed-class-politics-business> [accessed 12 July 2019]; Daniel Boffey, 'How 30 years of a polarized economy have squeezed out the middle class', *Observer*, 7 March 2015 https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/mar/07/vanishing-middle-class-london-economy-divide-rich-poor-england> [accessed 12 July 2019]; Sean Coughlan, 'Middle classes losing out to ultra-rich', *BBC News*, 10 April 2019 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-47853444> [accessed 11 April 2019].

diminishing as a result of the financial crisis. However, I am not interested in confronting the middle class as falling away; rather this thesis argues that the middle class of the 'classless society' has undergone a re-coding as a result of the financial crisis, and can now be seen to be re-forming as the character type of the precariat. It is axiomatic that capitalism produces class society and classes with the precariat a subject defined by movement, dynamism, and a conditionality that is concerned with the perpetual task of remaking itself. As Mike Savage argues, the middle is marked by a degree of fluidity, moving between different strata in a fragmented class model.[27] As such, each figure of the precariat is marked in this way. A cultural mapping of neoliberalism's constitutive elements and the way in which they shape the precariat occurs later in this Introduction.

Following the financial crisis, and the various national and international political movements that manifested, such as Occupy, Jodi Dean argued that 'new assertions of will, desire, and

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[27] Mike Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century* (London: Pelican, 2015), p. 193.

collective strength' may be observed.[28] Lanchester's novel may be read as a literary form responding to such a development, but the figure central to such social movements – as Standing suggests – is 'the educated', 'bohemian' and 'transformative' part of the precariat, the agent of change.[29] As the novel central to the discussion in Chapter Two *Francis Plug: How To Be A Public Author* shows, the millennial is characterised rather by self-reliance and self-interest. Francis Plug is not only the main character, but also the 'author' of the text as read and is thus centre stage. Ewen's novel articulates a structural critique of the banking sector, of financialisaton, and the financial crisis, and locates the inequality it has produced in the intimate relationship between Plug and his employer, Mr. Stapleton. Situated in this economic and political context, and as a fragmented and repetitive narrative, the novel follows Plug as he attends different author events. It offers no developmental chronology but rather emphasises the paradoxical situation of millennial experience as having the appearance of

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[28] Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 6.

[29] Guy Standing, 'The Precariat and Class Struggle' *RCCS Annual Review*, 7 (2014), 3-16 (pp. 4-5). See also Standing, *The Precariat*, pp. 13-16.

developmental progress while being unable to transcend a precariat status.

Analysis of the millennial has rested on a particularly white – and historically, middle class – view the of class system. As one commentator puts it: 'Many of the behaviours attributed to millennials are the behaviours of a specific subset of mostly white, largely middle-class people born between 1981 and 1996.'[30] Expanding the remit of this thesis, Chapter Three considers the place of the refugee, via Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2004) and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017). These novels open up the study to consider not only the effect of class on those born with British citizenship but also individuals who exist on the fringes of class society in Britain. These novels offer two similar, yet divergent, approaches to the precariat through the migrant-refugee figure within the context of global capital's drive for profit. Kunzru relies on a conventional realism, and as Philip Leonard writes, *Transmission* 'appears curiously to remain safely encoded within the familiar structures of satirical realism', with Kunzru declining to use

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[30] Anne Helen Petersen, 'How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation', *Buzzfeed News*, 5 January 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/millennials-burnout-generation-debt-work> [accessed 27 April 2019].

forms that may suit its concern with technology.[31] Alternatively, via the device of the portal, Hamid circumvents material questions that have been the primary concern of journalism, documentary, and reportage in the context of refugees fleeing North Africa and the Middle East. He introduces the portal as a way for characters to transcend national boundaries. This literary device sees ordinary doors arbitrarily transformed into portals allowing characters to pass from nation state to nation state uninhibited so long as the authorities do not detect its existence. Characters pass through Britain and it is rendered a transient and impermanent place. Emphasising the precariat as spatially and temporally fluid, these fictions register the precariat as a figure of (enforced) migration – a central condition of class life – and operating in a state of impermanence.

No study of class in Britain today could be complete without attending to the question of austerity. As a recent report by the United Nations highlighted, austerity has resulted in the 'systematic immiseration of a significant part of the British population' with key groups identified as bearing the

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[31] Philip Leonard, *Literature After Globalisation: Textuality, Technology, and the Nation State* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 119.

brunt of the policy.[32] The report states: 'Women, racial and ethnic minorities, children, persons with disabilities and members of other historically marginalized groups face disproportionately higher risks of poverty.'[33] The subjects of austerity speak to the character types with which this thesis is concerned, confirming the significance of the precariat as a class subject. Chapter Four focuses specifically on the gendered subject of the 'chav mother' in relation to Jonathan Coe's *Number 11* (2015). Coe identifies key tropes from sociology, media studies, and cultural studies that have been related to the 'chav mother' and re-codes her in the middle-class subject of Val Doubleday, who experiences downward mobility because of the financial crisis and austerity measures. I will argue that Coe responds to the undoing of classlessness and consider the cultural politics of austerity. Rebeca Bramall notes, '[a]usterity culture's tendency to borrow from the past, its penetration by processes of

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[32] 'Visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights', 23 April 2019, <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/41/39/Add.1> [accessed 3 June 2019].

[33] 'Visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights', 23 April 2019, <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/41/39/Add.1> [accessed 3 June 2019].

consumption and commodification, and its preoccupation with present concerns, seem to offer little evidence of "real" historical consciousness of austerity Britain.'[34] If cultural objects with austerity at their centre evoke the past but seek not to present the actuality of the past that they ostensibly represent, Coe's text provides a way in which to respond. For Philip Tew, *Number 11* is preoccupied with the 'minutiae and mundanity' of contemporary life and necessarily evokes class concerns.[35] It is *Number 11*'s preoccupation with mundane details that may otherwise appear insignificant which makes Coe's novel revealing when read as an example of austerity fiction. Focusing on *Number 11*, the use of repetition and the image of the circle as metaphorical ways of coming to terms with the stasis and entrapment of the condition of austerity.

Chapter Five brings this thesis into the present moment via a consideration of 'post-Brexit' Britain. To varying degrees, it is concerned with the present, a static yet mobile condition at the centre of

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[34] Rebecca Bramall, *The Cultural Politics of Austerity: Past and Present in Austere Times* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 40.

[35] Philip Tew, 'Neo-Gothic Minutiae and Mundanity in Jonathan Coe's Satire, *Number 11*', *Jonathan Coe: Contemporary British Satire*, ed. by Philip Tew (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 185-200.

precariat existence. Its key features reflect the claim that the 'middle' classes from the proposed class structure, to which this introduction attends below, enjoy a degree of fluidity dependent on economic, cultural and social changes to circumstance.[36] The novels reflect this condition: the semblance of progress for Plug, even when it is rendered near impossible, Nadia's and Saeed's fluid movement across borders, but material conditions restricted, and Val's entrapment in the present moment. The term 'the present', then, finds a home in this chapter through consideration of what is named as 'class temporalities'. Focusing on Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* and Ali Smith's *Spring*, it identifies recognisable character types located in a 'hyper-present.' *The Cut*'s use of the ill-defined affective temporalities of 'Before' and 'After' locates the main character of this novel, Cairo, as well as the reader, in a sustained present bound up with the moment of Brexit. Smith's novel, however, moves backwards and forwards in non-linear fashion. By shifting backwards and forwards, it shows the condition of the present to be characterised by a diverse set of temporalities that is always at once and suggests a

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[36] Savage et al., *Social Class in the 21st Century*, p. 193.

formal consideration of a moment in which time seems to stand still.

Neoliberalism and Class

As is now commonly recognised, the term neoliberalism can be traced from the economic theory of Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, Ludwig von Mises, and into political policy, typically associated with Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Tony Blair.[37] In this economic sense, then, neoliberalism is a set of economic principles, as David Harvey notes, 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade'.[38] According to this perspective, neoliberalism designates the belief that the

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[37] Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (1944; Abingdon: Routledge, 2001); Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1982; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002). For an overview of the shift form liberalism to neoliberalism, see William Davies, 'A Bibliographic Review of Neoliberalism' *Theory, Culture, Society*, 7 March 2014 https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/william-davies-a-bibliographic-review-of-neoliberalism/> [accessed 15 October 2015]. See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1878-1979* (London; Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2005); Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (London: Zone, 2015).

[38] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 2.

amelioration of human existence may be (only) realised through the market, commodity exchange, and an individualised, entrepreneurial ethic. As with postwar Keynesianism, the state plays a distinctly different but critical role, 'the state has to guarantee […] the quality and integrity of money', Harvey asserts: 'It must also set up those military, defence, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets.'[39] According to Harvey, neoliberalism captures the state to service the market; 'if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, healthcare, social security, or environmental pollution),' he continues, 'then they must be created, by state action if necessary.'[40] Critically, however, 'beyond these tasks the state should not venture' since, according to this logic, Harvey asserts, the state cannot anticipate the unpredictable movements of the market.[41] Neoliberalism (re)establishes and asserts the role of the state to facilitate markets, profit making, and the other mechanisms of capitalism, such as encouraging and protecting the rights of property owners. It

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[39] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 2.
[40] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 2.
[41] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 2.

demands that the state's involvement in the running of the economy should be limited to facilitating the smooth operation of markets, to create new markets, and to offload (or outsource) state-run enterprises to the market where possible. The result of the state's role reoriented in this way necessarily and automatically delivers a key objective of neoliberalism: to reduce the size and operation of the state in its capacity of providing services.[42] According to such a perspective, neoliberalism is a philosophy of political economy that facilitates the reduction of social security provision by the state (including the funding of health care, education, and housing, as well as water, land, and immigration management).[43]

Neoliberalism has allowed, therefore, for the privatisation of various state assets in Britain, including railway franchises, the water, gas, and electricity utilities, housing, aerospace and petroleum, and the postal service. Traditional conservative politicians in Britain condemned this

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[42] Since 2010, popular and academic discourses have claimed that a period of austerity was entered upon the election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in Britain. Yet, as Harvey helpfully underscores, austerity – the reduction of state spending and budgets – is actually bound up with neoliberal economic ideas.

[43] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 2.

shift; Harold Macmillan, for instance, famously claimed an equivalence to 'selling off the family silver'.[44] In Britain, a departure from (conservative) parliamentarianism, in which the role of politicians is regarded to serve as custodians of state assets, rather than their owners with the authority to sell them off, is made possible. Under neoliberalism, a new form of conservative rule is implemented that is distinct. Hayek, for example, explained in *The Constitution to Liberty*, under the chapter 'Why I am Not a Conservative' that this new philosophy as opposed to conservatism because it 'cannot offer an alternative to the direction in which we are moving.'[45] For Hayek, neoliberalism is about economic progress and not maintenance of institutions or class hierarchies. It is easy to see Hayek's influence over Thatcher, and their ideological differences to MacMillan in this way. It is perhaps why critics, such as American Henry Giroux, on the one hand describe neoliberalism as 'a more virulent and brutal form of market capitalism' and on the other hand, why

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[44] In a speech to the Tory Reform Group, MacMillan said: 'The sale of assets is common with individuals and states when they run into financial difficulties. First, all the Georgian silver goes, and then all that nice furniture that used to be in the saloon. Then the Canalettos go.' Harold MacMillan in 'Stockton attacks Thatcher policies', *The Times*, (9 November 1985), p. 1.

[45] F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960; London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 343-356, p. 344.

Harvey contends that neoliberalism has not only overseen a restoration of class power but also a reconfiguration of the constitutive parts of that class.[46] That is, neoliberalism has been unsentimental about returning power to the traditional elites – such as the aristocracy – and interested instead in redirecting wealth to new entrepreneurs and self-made businesspeople, arguably, in the image of Thatcher herself.

In addition, a key aspect of neoliberalism is an identifiable shift in capitalist production from the 'real' economy – manufacturing, for instance – where commodities are produced and exchanged to the process of financialisation, whereby profit is increasingly dominated by finance, or as Gerald Epstein puts it: 'financialization means the increasing role of financial motives, financial markets, financial actors and financial institutions in the operation of the domestic and international economies.'[47] Financialisation received a sizable portion of the blame for the 2008 financial crisis and for good

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[46] Henry Giroux, 'The Terror of Neoliberalism: Rethinking the Significance of Cultural Politics', *College Literature*, 32 (2005), p. 2; Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 31.

[47] 'Gerald A. Epstein, 'Introduction: Financialization and the World Economy', in *Financialization and the World Economy*, ed. by Gerald A. Epstein (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2005), pp. 3-16 (p. 3).

reason. Increased levels of borrowing, and thus high amounts of public and personal debt, not only stifled economic growth and state investment, but facilitated the subprime mortgage crisis in which borrowers without credible financial credentials were able to obtain mortgages, which were then shorted on the stock exchange.[48] Deregulation of the stock market also occurred alongside other neoliberal reforms, enabling the globe's financial centres – and the City of London in particular – to increase profits.[49] Yet, as David Kotz recognises, financialisation is not specific to neoliberalism but is, rather, a more general tendency in capitalism. When markets become unstable after profit is generated in a specific industry, capital seeks to preserve its wealth by investing profits in other areas of the economy, often via the stock market. Neoliberalism, Kotz argues, 'does not represent the interests of finance capital alone. It represent[s] the changed interests of a relatively unified capitalist class under the particular historical conditions prevailing during the period of

[48]Ran Duchin, Oguzhan Ozbas and Berk A. Sensoy, 'Costly external finance, corporate investment, and the subprime mortgage credit crisis', *Journal of Financial Economics*, 97 (2010), 418-435; Phatis Lysandrou, 'Global Inequality, Wealth Concentration and the Subprime Crisis: A Marxian Commodity Analysis', *Development and Change*, 42.1 (2011), 183-208.
[49] Grace Blakeley, *Stolen: How to Save the World From Financialisation* (London: Repeater, 2019), p. 143.

crisis of the preceding state-regulated SSA in the 1970s.'[50] Indeed, the financial crisis seemed proof of neoliberalism's inherent failure, with Joseph Stiglitz's comment that 'the fall of Wall Street is for market fundamentalism what the fall of the Berlin Wall was for communism', ostensibly confirming the demise of financial capitalism's hegemony.[51] In this sense, financial capitalism is associated with neoliberalism.

Financialisation is a significant feature of neoliberal development from the 1980s to the present day. Finance, and the high levels of personal and public debt it has helped to create, enabled the politically motivated discourse to reduce public and personal debt, which became prevalent after the financial crises, especially from 2010 as part of state policy. Indeed, finance capital's proven failure yielded, as Will Davies notes, a new stage of

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[50] David M. Kotz, 'Neoliberalism and Financialization', in *Relations of Global Power: Neoliberal Order and Disorder* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2011), pp. 1-18 (p. 11).

[51] Joseph Stiglitz in Nathan Gardels, 'Stiglitz: The Fall of Wall Street is to Market Fundamentalism What the Fall of the Berlin Wall Was to Communism'. See also, Jamie Peck, Nik Theodore, and Neil Brenner, 'Neoliberalism and its Malcontents', in *The Point is to Change It: Geographies of Hope and Survival in an Age of Crisis*, ed. by Noel Castree, Paul A. Chatterton, Nik Heynen, Wendy Larner, Melissa W. Wright (Chichester: Wiley, 2010), pp. 94-116 (p. 109). See also Simon Springer, 'Postneoliberalism?', *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 47.1 (2015), 5-17.

neoliberalism altogether – 'punitive neoliberalism' – which ushers in a revitalised form of neoliberal discipline.[52] This shift from neoliberalism as a set of economic principles persists during this period as what Wendy Brown describes as a 'peculiar form of reason', which is to say, 'neoliberal reason', which is 'ubiquitous today in statecraft and the workplace, in jurisprudence, education, culture, and a vast range of quotidian activity'.[53] This mode of reason, Brown argues, 'is converting the distinctly *political* character, meaning, and operation of democracy's constituent elements into *economic* ones.'[54] The economic remains an essential component of neoliberalism in such accounts, but rather than inferring a way of doing economics, running fiscal budgets, or a philosophical ideal of market supremacy, neoliberalism in this mode concretely seeks to appropriate what is traditionally regarded as belonging to the non-economic realm. Specifically, aspects attached to the body politic are reconstituted in terms of the economic, the market, and the rationality applied to market exchange and

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[52] Will Davies, 'The New Neoliberalism', *New Left Review,* 101 (2016), pp. 121-134.

[53] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 17.

[54] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 17. Italics in the original.

privatisation. As such, this impulse not only refers to the neoliberalisation – in particular, the 'economisation' – of institutions, such as the university, hospital, or housing, which incidentally marks a shift from services provided by the state to profit-making entities, but also extends to individual subjects and citizens in the form of *homo oeconomicus* (rather than *homo politicus*), families, and social norms – specific relations to life processes are inevitably construed through a market logic.[55] Neoliberalism is, therefore, 'an order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life.'[56]

Although Brown's theorisation, which is situated in the tradition of Michel Foucault, lays out a precise, yet broad, conceptualisation of neoliberalism in the form that it takes today, she is also keen to point out that neoliberalism is 'a loose and shifting signifier.'[57] The imprecision of conceptual signification begs the question whether

[55] Koray Çalışkan and Michel Callon, 'Economization, Part I: Shifting Attention from the Economy Towards Processes of Economization', *Economy and Society*, 38.3 (2009), 369-398.
[56] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 30.
[57] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 20.

any such term – class, gender, race, for example – could or should command an absolute essentialism. Taylor C. Boas and Jordan Gans-Morse take the position that its usage in academic contexts is problematic because 'its meaning […] is often not debated at all' and as a result, 'we are not faced with too many definitions but with too few.'[58] There is certainly a clue to this sensibility in the criticism that broaches the topic. Jeremy Gilbert's introduction to *Neoliberal Cultures* (2016), for example, asks, 'What Kind of Thing *is* Neoliberalism?', indicating its conceptual elusiveness.[59] Recognising its difficulty as a term in relation to the novel, and literary criticism's attempts to theorise literary forms in relation to neoliberalism, Mathias Nilges argues that such an intellectual task should not be compared to a subject, say, on literature and unemployment, but more to one on 'American literature and the Sasquatch', indicating neoliberalism as an entity that is not wholly possible to capture, study, or grasp.[60] Is

[58] Taylor C. Boas and Jordan Gans-Morse, 'Neoliberalism: From New Liberal Philosophy to Anti-Liberal Slogan', *Studies in Contemporary International Development*, 44.2 (2009), 137-161 (p. 156).

[59] Jeremy Gilbert, 'What Kind of Thing Is Neoliberalism?', in *Neoliberal Culture*, ed. by Jeremy Gilbert (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2016), pp. 10-32.

[60] Mathias Nilges, 'Fictions of Neoliberalism: Contemporary Realism and the Temporality of Postmodernism's Ends', in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literature Culture*, ed. by

it a set of economic principles?[61] Is it a governing rationality?[62] Is it a term of abuse?[63] Identifying, as Boas and Gans-Morse do, the concept's underdefined status across disciplines, Nilges contends that the project of theorising neoliberalism and literature is an intellectual site of potentiality for critics, with the opportunity to shape a criticism on the subject.

This constitutive aspect of neoliberalism – its academic and definitional neglect – is explored in detail by Jamie Peck. '[N]eoliberalism is contradictory and polymorphic', Peck writes. 'It will not be fixed.'[64] Peck's proposition that 'the closest one can get to understanding the nature of neoliberalism is to follow its *movements*, and to triangulate between its ideological, ideational, and institutional currents, between philosophy, politics, and practice' is surely a sensible one for its contradictions and consistencies. The idea of 'movements' underpins the literary texts I have selected. As I argue in Chapter Two, Plug's wretched

Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2017), pp. 105-121 (p. 106).

[61] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 2.

[62] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 17.

[63] Boas and Gans-Morse, 'Neoliberalism: From New Liberal Philosophy to Anti-Liberal Slogan', p. 139, p. 145, p. 148.

[64] Jamie Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 8.

existence is characterised by a slow descent into poverty, initially implying downward mobility, and the continuous pursuit of his dream to become a published author, suggesting upward mobility. This tension, I suggest, captures Plug's *horizontal* mobility. The novel indicates his existence in a never-ending movement, encapsulated in Lauren Berlant's concept of an 'ongoing present'.[65] In Chapter Three, movement is indivisible from Nadia and Saeed's status as refugees in *Exit West*; in *Transmission*, Arjun moves from India to the U.S. and eventually into obscurity, covertly transgressing borders, and Guy's cosmopolitanism means the novel explores individual movement from several perspectives. These characters, just as my reading of them through Giorgio Agamben's concept of *homo sacer* maintains, are in 'perpetual flight.'[66] My analysis of *Number 11* focuses on Val and her experience of poverty as told through riding a bus in a continuous circle. This movement is contradictory because it symbolises Val's demise into precarious life and poverty while remaining visibly continuous; her

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[65] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 15.

[66] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life,* trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 183.

movement also takes on a class dynamic, as she is effectively paraded through the second city's suburbs. Chapter Five's argument on the other hand concentrates on the post-2008 era as embodying movement as explored in the previous chapters: characters participate in movement coterminous with the stasis of a cultural moment. Movement works as a contradictory process in the texts, without a final destination but moving nonetheless, and is apposite for reading through Peck's 'definition' of neoliberalism.

Peck's use of *movements* implies the act of moving between thought, practice, and institutions. 'Movements' also conjures ideas of uprisings, collective assembly, policy proposals, mobilisation, organisation, and political demands. Movements can therefore indicate systemic and revolutionary change. The fiction I have selected is 'literary': for example, Ewen's novel is about the Booker Prize, anticipating a reader familiar with middle-brow writing, while Smith and Hamid were nominated for the Booker in 2017. My texts are ultimately preoccupied with social commentary, exploring the human condition and ways subjects are produced. I have chosen literary texts, instead of crime or romance fiction, because

'the precariat' as an identity comprises several aspects beyond that which is associated with a 'working class' in more popular genres. More saliently, and as Standing writes, the educated portion of the precariat is the 'potentially transformative part of the precariat, the new vanguard.'[67] Considering 'movements' in the revolutionary sense, literary fiction serves as a useful window through which an analysis of what the precariat might be.

Neoliberalism's far-reaching tendency to traverse the areas of philosophy, political economy, and contemporary culture confirms neoliberalism as an amorphous, capacious, dynamic and indeterminate 'thing', to borrow Gilbert's phrasing.[68] As Peck explains, however, academics entering into 'hair-splitting' over definitions and who 'attempt to transcendentally "fix" neoliberalism are destined to be frustrated, and for good reason':

> for all its doctrinal certainty, the neoliberal project is paradoxically defined by the very *unattainability* of its fundamental goal—frictionless market rule. Rather than the goal itself, it is the oscillations and vacillations around frustrated attempts to reach it that shape the revealed form of neoliberalism as a contradictory mode of market governance.

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[67] Guy Standing, 'The Precariat and Class Struggle', *RCCS Annual Review*, (2015), 3-16 (p. 8).

[68] Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*, p. 8. Italics in the original.

> Pristine definitions of neoliberalization are therefore simply unavailable; instead, concretely grounded accounts of the process must be chiselled out of the interstices of state/market configurations.[69]

To seek to provide a heroic definition of neoliberalism without recognising its diffuse uncertainty, its frustrated constitutive ontology is to fail to grasp its operational functionality. Neoliberalism is characterised by oscillations, vacillations, and a perpetual and optimistic attempt to achieve its ideal state is central to understanding what neoliberalism might be: an amorphous formation attempting to remake itself in perpetuity. Given this context, Harvey seems justified in describing neoliberalism as a 'process of neoliberalization.'[70]

The novels I have selected also emphasise 'movements' via a series of mobile metaphors. Especially appearing in *Transmission*, *Exit West*, and *Number 11*, but also in *Spring*, these metaphors stress how the characters - for example, the 'train' in Smith functions paradoxically not as an object of movement but as symbolic of the 'hyper present', the condition I argue is representative of the era this thesis

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[69] Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*, pp. 15-16. Italics in the original.

[70] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 3. See also Noel Castree, 'From Neoliberalism to Neoliberalisation: Consolations, Confusions, and Necessary Illusions', *Environment and Planning A*, 38 (2006), 1-6.

considers as static, forever trapped in the same moment; one train station Smith depicts is incidentally a place where nobody exists. As with the portal in *Exit West*, movement between places - sometimes even locations on the other side of the world - are easily accessible by stepping through a 'door'. As boundaries between place collapse, home is everywhere: every place belongs to everyone. This equalising effect is supposedly facilitated by neoliberalism's movements, but such an equalising is delivered by neoliberalism's exploitative condition. Of these metaphors, most intriguing is the 'camp'. Discussed at length in Chapter Three in Kunzru and Hamid through Agamben's *homo sacer*, the camp is a locus in which states can cast out rights. But in Chapter Four, the camp also takes on added significance as the location of punitive neoliberalism in action: Val's 'right' to ascend through hard work and skill in the neoliberal meritocracy is cast out through nefarious practices of TV executives. The camp is always in flux, appearing in new zones, and is re-made in new contexts: Haiti, Poland, and now, as Coe's novel presents, in the Australian jungle.

Political theorists, cultural theorists, and social scientists, therefore, view neoliberalism as an

amorphous, expansive, and therefore difficult concept to understand as a totalising formation. As a set of economic principles, as financialisation, a mode of reason, and a governing rationality, neoliberalism seems too vast, slippery, and abstract, too totalising, to be comprehended as a singular entity. This is particularly the case in relation to academic conventions of designating and theorising such a concept. Academic work often – and necessarily – focuses on a constitutive element, an approach that gives space and time to this aspect in order to say and understand something meaningful about a term. This thesis, however, departs from the specificity evident in such accounts. The increased conceptual popularity of neoliberalism is evident since the financial crisis as literary critical interest indicates in its different approaches. I do not seek to separate these strands of thinking. Given neoliberalism's complexity, I do not compartmentalise this concept by focusing on one of its specific dynamics but explore neoliberalism as a slippery conceptual formation rather than attempt to circumnavigate its complexity.

Rather than intervene dramatically in definitional debates about conceptual terms, such as

neoliberalism, this thesis puts concepts from critical and cultural theory and the social sciences in conversation with literary texts to offer ways of reading the precariat in them. The novel is well-placed to navigate neoliberalism's conceptual slipperiness. As a form, the novel is historically attached to class and capitalism, specifically in relation to the development of industrialised capitalism.[71] But the novel's perpetual re-making of itself in terms of genre and form within a recognisably defined structure chimes with a consideration of neoliberalism in relation as a totalising formation. Understood in this way, neoliberalism is consistent with how class is viewed in this thesis: it is at once a diverse and myriad experience that cuts across race, gender, and ethnicities, as well as cutting across traditional markers of class experience and identification. That class is under continual transformation is in no small part due to neoliberalism's perennial need to remake itself and resultant class formations speak to this tendency. This Introduction turns next to a

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[71] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957; London: Pimlico, 2000); Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900* (London: Verso, 1998); Lee Rourke, 'Hop-Picking: Forging a Path in the Edgelands of Fiction', in *Know Your Place: Essays on the Working Class by the Working Class*, ed. by Nathan Connolly (Liverpool: Dead Ink, 2017), pp. 164-177.

consideration of class formation more generally and maps out the critical landscape of its trajectory since neoliberalism emerged in Britain. This section develops the specific ways in which neoliberalism, in its current manifestation, produces class, and the forms class formation and identity take in the current arrangement, notably in terms of age, space, and mobility, mirroring neoliberalism's constitutive ontology.

A consequence of neoliberal capitalism's development and its legitimation in policy initiatives and parliamentary elections in Britain has been the purported demise of social class.[72] Because of the 'feminisation' of labour in Britain and globally, manifest in the rise of white-collar work, easier access to debt, and the decline of traditional markers of class, such as key, state-run manufacturing operations, the working class was believed to disappear, replaced, in cultural terms, by a homogenous middle class.[73] One way in which this

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[72] Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters, *The Death of Class* (London: Sage, 1996).

[73] Standing argues that as part of a global market economy, women took a growing proportion of all jobs in a global trend towards what he calls 'the feminisation of labour': 'This was feminisation in a double sense of more women being in jobs and more jobs being of the flexible type typically taken by women. The trend reflected labour informalisation, the growth of services and use of young women in export processing zones.' As Standing notes, the jobs created led to a 'rising demand for

middle class manifested was the appearance of the subject – as an actuality and in cultural terms – of neoliberalism itself: *homo oeconomicus*. For Foucault, the production of *homo oeconomicus* is a result of a shift from classic liberalism, whereby capitalism is predicated on a model of exchange, to neoliberalism which is predicated on a model of enterprise.[74] This transition is important to note because capitalism's transmogrification under neoliberalism situated the subject not as citizen, as Foucault implicitly suggests, but as an economic actor. If the subject of neoliberalism is *homo oeconomicus* – encapsulating in the individual subject an entrepreneurial ethic – it follows that classes cannot exist, since capitalist society under neoliberalism becomes a society of economic actors, businesspeople and owners. It is why Margaret Thatcher was able to say with some legitimacy that 'there is no such thing as society; there are individual men and women, and there are families.'[75] Under

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women as well as a shift of men into insecure low-paid jobs regarded as the form for women.' The feminisation of labour, then, refers to more women entering the labour market, as well as labour shifting to lower and less secure jobs. Standing, *The Precariat*, p. 60.

[74] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, p. 149.

[75] Margaret Thatcher, interview for *Woman's Own*, *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, 23 September 1987, http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689 [accessed 15 July 2019].

such an arrangement, collectivity is made impossible, and the emergence of a discourse around networks, rather than strata, groups, or classes, can be identified.

If Thomas Piketty and others are right to say that neoliberalism produces the stark, deleterious effects of inequality that seriously undermines the meritocratic principles on which democratic societies are ostensibly built, then this model of neoliberalism, and its subject *homo oeconomicus*, does not explain the continued persistence of poverty, inequality of opportunity, social and cultural inequality, nor does this development explain why professions continue to be dominated by members of the richest stratum in British life.[76] This subject may support the abolition of the welfare state, even if she relies on it to survive, since she must look only to the market. However, this subjectivity does not eliminate the material existence

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[76] Economists, anthropologists, sociologists, and so forth have described a divergent and extreme form of inequality unseen for decades. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the 21st Century*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (London: Harvard University Press, 2014), p.1; Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* (London: Penguin, 2009); Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, *The Inner Level: How More Equal Societies Reduce Stress, Restore Sanity and Improve Everyone's Well-Being* (London: Penguin, 2019); Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future* (London: Penguin, 2012); Danny Dorling, *Inequality and the 1%* (London: Verso, 2015); Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, p. 170.
Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, pp. 194-197.

of inequality, the poverty it produces, high levels of work, time poverty, or other miseries that capitalism produces in order to survive. It is therefore essential to note that alongside *homo oeconomicus* as a constitutive element of the neoliberal subject's contemporary subjectivities, unequal class relations in the specific economic, social, cultural and political context of Britain are essential to understanding this development in neoliberalism. For example, Nick Srnicek argues that the rise of 'lean platforms' operate under a model where almost everything is outsourced: fixed capital, maintenance, training, and of course, workers.[77] 'In America,' he suggests, 'these platforms legally understand their workers as "independent contractors" rather than as "employees".'[78] Such a model allows companies to save on labour costs, as well as on sick and maternity benefits, over time, and other forms of regulation designed to protect workers. Workers, however, are ultimately dependent on the platform to funnel work to them and comprise labour reserved for the working classes: delivery drivers, taxi drivers, and other low skilled forms of labour. The worker is re-configured

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[77] Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), p. 75. Ebook.
[78] Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, p. 76.

here as self-determining in his or her labour. According to the logic, everyone is ostensibly free to participate in this culture, so long as they make the effort. The situation registers an intensification of self-determination and freedom as desirable ethics under neoliberalism: everyone has equal access. As well as producing new forms of exploitation, it also paradoxically produces subjects that are excluded from free participation. When the migrant-refugee arrives in Britain or some other developed nation where neoliberalism is influential, they may not be permitted to work, can be refused social provisions to facilitate access to this version of individual freedom, and risk detention. This subject undermines the inclusive vision neoliberalism ostensibly proffers. Inequality, then, is manifest in several forms.

Yet, triumphalist accounts persisted and did so in the wake of neoliberalism's victory over social democracy in the 1980s in Britain and elsewhere. The collapse of socialism in 1989 seemed to confirm liberal capitalist democracy as the hegemonic mode of organising economic, social and political life.[79] In a moment defined by historically significant events,

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[79] Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, 16 (1989), 3-18; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992; London: Penguin, 2012).

including the collapse of the Berlin Wall, key texts appeared declaring the end of class as political struggle, and identifying the new and salient politics replacing it. 'Class radicalism is no longer the flavour of the month in the intellectual salons and on university campuses', Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters observed. 'Like beards and Che Guevara berets, class is *passé*, especially among advocates of the postmodernist avant-garde and practitioners of the new gender-, eco- and ethno-centred politics.'[80]

The 2008 financial crisis

A pivotal moment for the revival of class in popular and academic discourses seems to be the event of the financial crisis of 2008, which symbolically occurred with the collapse of Lehman Brothers in September 2008. The bank bailouts by central government in Britain provided another example of neoliberalism's reliance on the state, remarkably witnessing state ownership of the Royal Bank of Scotland. An unintended consequence saw renewed interest in class, noted with incredulity by Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek. Not only do they confirm these events as world changing in the context of the End of

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[80] Pakulski and Waters, *The Death of Class*, p. 1.

History, but assert, 'If 1989 was the inaugural year of the new world order, 2001 announced its decline, and the collapse of the banking system in 2008 marked the beginning of a return to full-blown history.'[81] They also identify an increased interest in Marxist ideas at a conference on which their book *The Idea of Communism* (2010) was based. 'When we first planned it, in the summer of 2008,' they write, 'we expected only a limited audience and booked a room capable of holding 180. But when, in early 2009, we opened for registration, the interest was such that we had twice to move to larger rooms, eventually ending in the main auditorium […] accommodating 900 people, with an adjacent video-link room holding another 300'.[82] Enhanced delegate numbers at an academic conference do not necessarily confirm a shift in academic tastes nor a reconfiguring of intellectual interests, but this example nonetheless illustrates interest in the potentiality of the 'idea' of communism and class 'radicalism'. Moreover, two subsequent volumes of the *Idea of Communism* have appeared since, as well as monographs on – for the

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[81] Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, 'Introduction: The Idea of Communism', in *The Idea of Communism*, ed. by Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2010), pp. vii-x (p. vii-viii).

[82] Douzinas and Žižek, 'Introduction', p. xiii.

authors at least – the exciting promise of a future class politics.[83] Appearing between 2010 and 2012, *The Communist Hypothesis*, *The Actuality of Communism*, and *The Communist Horizon* diagnosed neoliberalism as a failed idea and reignited conceptual and materialist arguments for a communist politics for the twenty-first century.[84]

This intellectual revival in class has seen renewed interest not only in class as a *political* idea, but also as revitalised in terms of the constitutive elements of economic, social and cultural life. Mike Savage's study *Social Class in the 21st Century* is a notable example. This research emerged out of a survey conducted on social class with sociologists from across the country; the researchers used the data to chart patterns and devise new class categories to better reflect class relations as they exist in Britain today. Savage and the other sociologists who led the Great British Class Survey's research also helped shape the Great British 'Class Calculator', which is featured on the BBC's website where the public

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[83] Slavoj Žižek (ed), *The Idea of Communism 2: The New York Conference* (London: Verso, 2013); Slavoj Žižek and Alex Taek-Gwang Lee (eds), *The Idea of Communism 3: The Seoul Conference* (London: Verso, 2016).

[84] Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (London: Verso, 2010); Bruno Bosteels, *The Actuality of Communism* (London: Verso, 2011); Dean, *The Communist Horizon*.

answers basic questions with the calculator assigning participants to one of the seven new classes devised.[85] *Social Class in the 21st Century* is divided into two sections: following Bourdieu, it explains the theory capitals – economic, cultural, social – and reads them alongside the findings from the survey. These three 'capitals', and the various ways in which they intersect, determine which of the seven classes to which the user of the calculator will be ascribed. For example, inequality in this study refers to economic inequality but also inequality of social and cultural capital: what kind of social connections does a subject have? What does a subject do in her spare time? The second section provides specific examples of the ways in which capital and its variegated combination is embodied in subjects – a kind of 'intersectional capital' – and lists several areas that show class experience and formation as made manifest in contemporary Britain. This study is most compelling when it explores the stratified inequalities that the university system produces, class in terms of generationality, and in its analysis of spatialised

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[85] Mike Savage, Niall Cunningham, Fiona Devine, Sam Friedman, Daniel Laurison, Lisa McKenzie, Andrew Miles, Helene Snee, Paul Wakeling, 'The Great British class calculator: What class are you?', *BBC*, 3 April 2013, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22000973> [accessed 20 July 2019].

inequality. The latter critically situates inequality within urban areas, such as, London, Birmingham, and Manchester, and inequalities between the capital and other urban areas, as well as between urban and rural areas, where pronounced forms of inequality (economic, cultural, social) exist. By recognising contemporary developments, such as the expansion of higher education, emergent forms of technologies (like Twitter), Savage and the sociologists behind the survey map new class experience into a contemporary context.

The seven classes named in *Social Class in the 21st Century* are: 'Elite', 'Established Middle Class', 'Technical Middle Class', 'New Affluent Workers', 'Traditional Working Class', 'Emergent Service Workers', 'Precariat'. It is not my view that such categories should necessarily be adopted, but that the survey's analysis is useful for understandings of class as manifest in Britain currently. The outlining of new classes emphasises degrees of mobility between classes. First, there is a strong possibility (over half) that those born into the 'elite' or the 'precariat' will remain in this category through adulthood, and the likelihood is stronger for those

from the precariat.[86] Moreover, it is these classes that

are the most pronounced, where the five classes in the

middle of the strata overlap in complex ways: 'there

is considerable fuzziness in the middle reaches of the

social structure,' Savage writes, and loosely posits a

new and revised – although fragmented – three-tier

class system:

> the class hierarchy which we distinguished
> separates out three main groups: a small elite
> at the top, massively better off than others, a
> somewhat larger 'precariat' at the bottom, who
> score lower than others in relation to all three
> kinds of capital, and then five other classes in
> the middle, who have a much more hybrid mix
> of sorts of capital and can't be put in a simple
> hierarchy.[87]

It follows that these five classes contain degrees of

fluidity and mobility between and among themselves

that is less the case for those in the elite and the

precariat. The nomenclature is not of primary

concern here, but it is vital to recognise the degree of

movement between classes and the implication this

mobility confers on contemporary conceptualisations

of class. Although structurally, this sociological

model announces a restoration of a three-tiered class

system, it is more complicated than the established

taxonomies of class, not least because analysis

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[86] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, p. 193.
[87] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, p. 172.

includes incipient developments of class formation in the 2010s. Moreover, if subjects move between classes, they can be seen at once to be produced and re-produced by changes to their material conditions. They can be seen to be made and re-made as capitalism shifts, adapts and morphs in its characteristic protean way. For example, a self-employed taxi driver for Uber comes to represent *homo oeconomicus*, but she works precariously, without employment benefits, such as sick pay, holiday pay or maternity benefit. The rise of Uber is relatively recent, and the ways in which capitalism adapts to accommodate and exploit workers is illustrative of the ways in which theories adapt to how class manifests in any given moment.[88]

This view of social class as being remade in accordance with the dynamism of neoliberalism is evoked elsewhere. Selina Todd provides a deliberately loose but illustrative definition. 'Class', she writes, 'is a relationship defined by unequal power, rather than a way of life or an unchanging culture'. [89] Todd rejects fixed working-class identities, such as industrial workers, people from the

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[88] Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, pp. 74-87.
[89] Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class, 1910-2010* (London: John Murray, 2015), p. 7.

north, or the old. Owen Jones recognises this shift in working-class cultural characteristics and proposes one way in which the image of a working-class cultural figure might be imagined today: 'A blue-uniformed male factory worker with a union card in his pocket might have been an appropriate symbol for the working class of the 1950s. A low-paid, part-time, female shelf-stacker would certainly not be unrepresentative of the same class today'.[90] Todd is right to note a salient characteristic of class, which is that it is a structurally constitutive formation. Todd is also keen to revisit and rewrite twentieth-century working-class social history with a view to include working-class experiences that are otherwise omitted from traditional accounts. Admitting working-class women into this history, and in particular, domestic servants as part of this project, she writes: 'In 1910 – and in 1923 – domestic servants constituted the largest single group of working people in Britain', a role overwhelmingly performed by women.[91] Todd's analysis re-frames historical cultural imaginaries of class identity in terms of Jones' description of the

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[90] Owen Jones, *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* (London: Verso, 2011), p. 167.
[91] Todd, *The People*, p. 14, p. 43. Todd's history also includes histories of migration and black activism as part of working-class struggle.

male factory worker, an Arthur Seaton type in Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* into the domestic worker, a figure who has been virtually absent in working-class writing.[92]

Recent literary criticism that centres on working-class writing names writing about migration as class fiction, a distinction that makes class a primary lens of analysis. Nicola Wilson suggests: 'Twentieth-century British working-class writing has often been studied as a separatist white discourse, isolated from the colonial and postcolonial and our now vibrant research culture of black British literature'.[93] This 'too rigid separation of these fields', Wilson notes, 'perpetuates discussions of working-class writing under the implicit terms of

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[92] The turn towards regarding working-class identity and gender has been overseen by neoliberalism's tendency towards feminization of labour in the west. Neoliberalism's tendency to produce labour that is feminized – shop work, care work, affective labour – seems to confirm a contemporary class of feminized subjects. Moreover, the experience of the financial crisis was identified as a failure of unregulated masculinity. Finally, the fallout of the financial crisis, and the imposition of fiscal consolidation, is largely regarded to have impacted on women. See Ruth Sutherland, 'After the crash, Iceland's women lead the rescue', *Guardian*, 22 February 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/feb/22/iceland-women> [accessed 25 July 2019]; Ruth Sutherland, 'The real victims of the credit crunch? Women', *Guardian*, 18 January 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2009/jan/18/women-credit-crunch-ruth-sunderland> [accessed 25 July 2019]. An exception is Joan Riley, *Waiting in the Twilight* (London: Women's Press, 1987).

[93] Nicola Wilson, *Home in British Working-Class Fiction* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), p. 22.

whiteness, while also potentially ignoring what colonial and postcolonial writers have to say about class.'[94] Wilson is right to note this absence from criticism on working-class writing, and Tim Lott has confirmed this sentiment by arguing that working-class writing 'has come to mean little more than "white" writing'.[95] In addition to Wilson's claim, neglecting colonial, postcolonial and black writing in relation to class may also have the effect of not understanding salient issues central to class today, such as migration, historically central to class experience. Returning to the twentieth century and reimagining what working-class writing might be, what readings of these texts may do and how they may enrich the extant body of working-class writing is essential to recovering studies in the discipline. In *A History of Working Class Literature*, John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan note that 'we can find individuals and groups "writing back," adapting given class categories and creating their own sense of class traditions.'[96] This tradition persists and is alive

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[94] Wilson, *Home in British Working-Class Fiction*, p. 22.

[95] Tim Lott, 'The loneliness of the working-class writer', *Guardian*, 7 February 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/07/loneliness-working-class-writer-english-novelists> [accessed 22 July 2019].

[96] John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan, 'Introduction', in *A History of British Working Class Literature*, ed. by John

today in fiction about working-class experience, found in works such as Sharon Duggal's *The Handsworth Times* (2016) or Kavita Bhanot's *The Book of Birmingham* (2018), which is situated in such traditions, and as Pat Barker observed in the early 2000s, it 'fill[s] in the gaps of work that came before.'[97] Monographs such as Wilson's provide a similar function by identifying gaps in the tradition of literary criticism on working-class writing that enriches understanding of twentieth-century writing is primarily about working-class experience.

This thesis recognises the importance of such accounts at the same time as understanding their successful attempts to reconstitute working-class writing as historically situated in the twentieth century.[98] This thesis is interested in studies such as Savage's, which are keen to develop the ways class formation materialises in Britain today.[99] Examples

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Goodridge and Bridget Keegan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 1-9 (p. 1).

[97] Sharon Duggal, *The Handsworth Times* (Hebden Bridge: Bluemoose Books, 2016); Kavita Bhanot (ed), *The Book of Birmingham*: *A City in Short* (Manchester: Comma Press, 2018); Pat Barker in Sharon Monteith, 'Pat Barker', in *Contemporary British and Irish Fiction*: *An Introduction through Interviews* ed. by Sharon Monteith, Jenny Newman, Pat Wheeler (London: Hodders Education, 2004), pp. 19-35 (p. 20).

[98] See also Roberto del Valle Alcala, *British Working-Class Fiction: Narratives of Refusal and the Struggle Against Work* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

[99] Savage et al, *Social Class in the 21st Century*.

of work in literary studies that seeks to map and theorise twenty-first century accounts are limited with only a handful of examples available.[100] Nick Bentley's recent intervention is a rare example. 'Although it is certainly true that the idea of the working-class novel loses popularity amongst literary critics in the 1990s and 2000s,' Bentley writes, 'I am not certain that this means that fiction that deals with working-class culture has gone away.'[101] Bentley correctly argues that working-class consciousness – and by implication, working-class values, principles and so on – has persisted in spite of attempts by governments of different political persuasions to institute the notion of classlessness. For Bentley:

> what appears to have happened is that new critical paradigms, especially feminist, LGBT fiction, postcolonialism, the categoricalization of 'black' and Asian British fiction, the neo-historical novel, trauma narratives, and fiction that has focused on young subcultures have in fact drawn attention away from what could be described as a continued desire amongst British novelists to explore, examine and represent working-class life.'[102]

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[100] See Liam Connell, *Precarious Labour and Contemporary Fiction* (London: Palgrave, 2017).
[101] Nick Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction* (London: Palgrave, 2018), pp. 46-47.
[102] Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction*, p. 47.

Bentley's intervention sees him demand a re-reading of twenty-first century texts, which have otherwise been categorised in terms of these other paradigms, and argues for such texts to be read as examples of class fiction; read as class fiction, such texts – Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and *NW* (2012) are the examples Bentley uses – resituate class fiction in a new paradigm, where the intersectional experience of class is actualised in literary criticism.[103] Bentley's intervention here is an essential one since it casts off the reductive ideas of class fiction as being associated with white men in industrialised spaces.

This is not to say that literary criticism did not engage with working-class writing in intersectional ways. Bentley and Wilson's work builds on fiction and literary criticism in the 1990s and 2000s that performed class analyses through a diverse range of writers who are now labelled BAME, including Hanif Kureishi, Joan Riley, Ravinder Randhawa, Farhana Sheikh, and others who interrogated working-class

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[103] Bentley is also keen to read other novelists through a class lens: Novels by other writers covered in this book in other chapters could also be included in the category of working-class fiction, including works by Monica Ali, Pat Barker, Alasdair Gray, Kazuo Ishiguro, Andrea Levy, David Peace, Graham Swift, Sarah Waters, Irvine Welsh and Jeanette Winterson, as well as many others not discussed specifically here.' See Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction*, p. 47.

whiteness, such as Pat Barker, James Kelman and Livi Michael. Critical studies interrogated the study of white and BAME writers in Britain, or reconfigured how class was understood in contemporary fiction.[104] Building on this body of work, Bentley continues such intersectional analyses to include writing from the 2010s. Wilson's survey study looks back to the twentieth century as a whole and through a feminist lens situates fixtures of working-class writing like Sillitoe alongside Sam Sevlon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). This work, both retrospective and ongoing, provides recent examples of literary scholarship primarily pre-

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[104] Patrick Williams, 'Inter-Nationalism: Diaspora and Gendered Identity in Farhana Sheikh's *The Red Box*, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 30.1 (1995), 45-54.

Nahem Yousaf, 'Hanif Kureishi and "the brown man's burden"', *Critical Survey*, 8.1 (1996), 14-25 (p. 17); Sharon Monteith, 'On the streets and in the tower blocks: Ravinder Randhawa's "A Wicked Old Woman" (1987) and Livi Michael's "Under a Thin Moon" (1992)', *Critical Survey*, 8.1 (1996), 26-36 (p. 29). See also, Patrick Williams, 'Imaged communities: Black British film in the eighties and nineties', *Critical Survey*, 8.1 (1996), pp. 3-13; George Wotton, 'Knowable communities and communities of readers: Reading/writing literature in the new universities', *Critical Survey,* 9.1 (1996), pp. 37-48; Susan Alice Fischer, 'Women Writers, Global Migration, and the City: Joan Riley's "Waiting in the Twilight" and Hanan Al-Shaykh's "Only in London"', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 23.1 (2004), 107-120; Mary McGlynn, '"Middle-Class Wankers" and Working-Class Texts: The Critics and James Kelman', *Contemporary Literature*, 43.1 (2002), pp. 50-84 (pp. 60-61); John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the* metropolis (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 93-125, pp. 126-157; Sharon Monteith, Nahem Yousaf, Margaretta Jolly and Ronald Paul, *Critical Perspectives on Pat Barker* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005); Andrew Smith, 'Ben Okri and the freedom whose walls are closing in', *Race & Class*, 47.1 (2005), 1-13.

occupied with recognising a need to rethink what counts in working-class canonicity.

Bentley's proposal follows Wilson's methodology and confirms a trend in literary studies of recognising working-class writing as emerging outside of the texts that dominate the discipline, such as Sillitoe's. This approach does not mean, however, that texts dealing explicitly with the misery of poverty, for example, in John McGregor's *Even the Dogs* or Lisa Blower's *Sitting Ducks,* must somehow be relegated in favour of such a writing.[105] Rather, it is to emphasise a need to place such texts in conversation with texts like Kit de Waal's *My Name is Leon* and Sharon Duggal's *The Handsworth Times*.[106] Nor is it to say that this approach is the concern of this thesis. On the contrary, this thesis takes Standing's concept of the precariat and proposes several ways in which a fiction of the precariat or a fiction of precariat experience might be developed. What is important to note here is it is the contention of this thesis that the work of rethinking

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[105] Jon McGregor, *Even the Dogs* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010); Lisa Blower, *Sitting Ducks* (Oswestry: Fair Acre, Press, 2016).
[106] Kit de Waal, *My Name is Leon* (London: Penguin, 2016); Sharon Duggal, *The Handsworth Times* (Hebden Bridge: Bluemoose Books, 2016).

and remaking, proposing and potentially failing, to identify, name and map new forms of class fiction today. The questions with which this thesis is concerned are less about relying on established models of class to analyse class but examining what theory and criticism is available, what forms of literary production speak to class concerns now, how texts respond to the contemporary situation and what subjects they represent.

No doubt, some readers may object to the mapping of class provided above because of what it elides. Critics both hostile to class and those who find it useful recognise the difficulty of using the term. Pakulski and Waters begin their books by noting that class 'has always been a contentious concept'.[107] Gary Day recognises its conceptual difficulty because of its broad usage: '"Class"' is a notoriously difficult term to define because it occurs across a range of disciplines – sociology, politics, cultural studies, and "literary criticism" – all of which give it different meanings, weightings and explanatory values'.[108] I have attempted, and continue throughout this thesis, to hold together these different strands in

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[107] Pakulski and Waters, *The Death of Class*, p. 1.
[108] Day, *Class*, p. 2.

the mapping above, in the first instance, to provide a multi-disciplinary approach to the analysis and to give it additional credibility, and in the second instance, to reflect the internal definitional tensions encapsulated in the term. In addition, given the definition of neoliberalism outlined above, it is essential, this thesis seeks to show, to have reflected on any definition of the imperfect, shifting and constant remaking of class identity: it is, in Standing's words, 'a class in the making.'[109] Various terms signifying class are available in the critical literature, as I have established, and are invariably used. This thesis, however, is concerned with the precariat, which is understood as constituting a relation to neoliberalism, the subject, in other words, that is produced by this formation.

Capitalism, as neoliberalism, then, is characterised by its constitutive tendency to transform, shift, and adapt to the conditions with which it is at any one time presented. It produces classes. Following the aspects of neoliberalism teased out above, class must be characterised by mobility, movements, evolutions and shifts. Class mirrors and reflects neoliberalism's dynamism when

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[109] Standing, *The Precariat*, p. 7.

it appears in fiction in new and ever-changing ways. This status is poetically encapsulated in Goodridge and Keegan's compelling description of class as 'an evolving and elastic concept, a moveable feast'.[110] Yet the terms still need further clarification to operate in the context of writing about the precariat over the last decade. Working class is probably the most significant. As noted, this term has been bound up with a white, male conception of industrial labour, a mode of relation to capitalism in decline in Britain in the early twenty-first century. Hardt and Negri explain the way in which the 'working class' is problematic now: 'In its most limited conception, the working class refers only to industrial labor and thus excludes all other laboring classes'; and more broadly, 'the working class refers to all waged laborers and thus excludes the various unwaged classes.'[111] This understanding of the term is related to the Marxist conceptualisation of the proletariat – that is, all who sell their labour – and therefore risks excluding home makers (the majority of whom are women), children, and to adopt a more historical view, slaves, the unemployed, and other people who

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[110] Goodridge and Keegan, 'Introduction', p. 1.
[111] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2006), p. 106.

are unable to work because of disabilities, refugees and forced migrants. Marx recognised this, writing in 1870: 'It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power.'[112] Given that the working class historically constituted this white, male subject of industrialised capitalism in representational terms, it has been difficult to use this vocabulary meaningfully for such subjects. The permanently unemployed (the *lumpenoproletariat*) did not enjoy favour from Marx and Engels, a figure that presented this group as a problem for revolutionary proletariat struggle.[113] Yet, more recently, and as Todd, Wilson, and Bentley's work suggests, this term is being resituated in terms of such new, ascendant, identitarian formations of this term. As this introduction has already argued, this category is undergoing a reconstitution, incorporating (im)migrants, colonial and postcolonial subjects, black people and women into its terminological reimagination. It is this development that Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, writing in the U.S. context, describes plainly: 'the working

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[112] Marx to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt in *Marx, Engels: Selected Correspondence* (Progress Books, 1975), pp. 236-237.
[113] Engels, for instance, wrote: 'the *lumpenproletariat*, this scum of depraved elements from all social classes, with headquarters in the big cities, is worst of all the possible allies.' Engels cited in John Welshman, *Underclass: A History of the Excluded Since 1880* (2006; London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 7. Italics in the original.

class is female, immigrant, Black, white, Latino/a, and more. Immigrant issues, gender issues, and anti-racism issues *are* working class issues.'[114] This term must, therefore, be understood both as a historically white, male, and attached to labour under industrialised capitalism and as a multi-ethnic, multi-gendered subject. It is vital to understand this constitutive multiplicity of the term 'working class' in its contemporary and historical designation in the present historical moment.

In the moment that working class has also come to represent the white, and northern, Brexit voter.[115] It is now almost exclusively used to refer to inhabitants of deindustrialised communities, in popular discourse. This figure is a significant one and is evidence of a discursive shift from classlessness to a naming of working classness characterised by xenophobia, racism, right-wing politics.[116] This shift

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[114] Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago, Haymarket, 2016), p. 216.

[115] Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014); Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin, 'Understanding UKIP: identity, social change, and the left behind', *The Political Quarterly*, 85.2 (2014), 277-284.

[116] Owen Jones, *Chavs*; David Gillborn, 'The White Working Class, Racism, and Respectability: Victims, Degenerates and Interest-Convergence', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 58.1 (2010), 3-25; Lynsey Hanley, *Respectable: The Experience of Class* (London: Penguin, 2016); Simon Winlow, Steve Hall, and James Treadwell, *The Rise of the Right: English nationalism and the transformation of working-class politics* (Bristol, Policy, 2017).

produces a complex picture. Classlessness, as will be discussed, designates a society and a subject characterised by social mobility, consumerism, and economic success, regardless of class background. Yet, classlessness also refers to an economic designation, and not a cultural one, and as such, responses to an emergent figure still attached to the term 'working class' situates a Brexit-supporting working class in the lineage of the 'working class' as vulgar and lacking taste, consistent with representations of class - and particularly, the 'chav' subject - in the early twenty-first century.[117]

In the context of Brexit, 'the people' is used to imply working-class Leave voters, but as it features in the title of Selina Todd's century-long working-class social history, it has a much longer history.[118] Thomas Hobbes' claim that 'the people is one' names it a single, homogenous mass, which is contrasted specifically with the multitude.[119] There is

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[117] See Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1986; Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 3; Beverley Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 99-105, p. 112.

[118] This usage is peculiar, since Todd's history is about working-class life, experience, and political activism, sometimes attached to the labour movement, but not exclusively. This term seems somewhat incongruous, then, because the book is not about formal politics, electoral procedures, and so on.

[119] Hobbes, cited in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. xvii.

great appeal in naming 'the people' as synonymous with the working class, as a homogenous class formation because this phrasing announces a formation of shared interests and experiences. Collectivising groups is a useful and often meaningful way of organising that can both develop deliberately and organically. In *Imagined Communities*, for example, Benedict Anderson describes how 'the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship' and reminds us how terms and concepts create forms of community.[120] 'The people' is one such function. Yet, this term seems inherently opposed to the subject that is at the centre of this thesis, and particularly so since this subject is a product of neoliberalism, a formation that demands individual self-interest, and a flexible, mobile identity. Moreover, and in many ways, 'the people' is appropriate for use in this context because it designates a set of political rights, something with which this thesis is implicitly concerned, but even this understanding fails to account for the diverse, cross-class actuality of the class subject today.

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[120] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2016; London: Verso, 1983), p. 15.

This thesis will look to neo-Marxist conceptions of class, such as Hardt and Negri's conceptualisation of the 'multitude' because a term in the tradition of Hobbes, Hardt and Negri contrast the multitude to the people; '"the people" is one', whereas 'The multitude' is

> composed of innumerable internal differences that can never be reduced to a unity of a single identity – different cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations; different forms of labour; different ways of living; different views of the world; and different desires. The multitude is a multiplicity of all these singular differences.[121]

The multitude is a multiplicity of individual subjects, constitutive of its being and, thus, not erased by the uniformity inherent in 'the people'. 'The multitude is composed of a set of singularities', 'a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different', Hardt and Negri write.[122] Such social and cultural differences are important in describing a class subject, given the vivid cultural differences that constitute class experience today. With the social and cultural becomes, rightly, recognised as equally constitutive of class formation as the economic.[123] It is doubly

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[121] Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. xiv.
[122] Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. 99.
[123] Savage et al, *Social Class in the 21st Century*; Atkinson, *Class*.

essential to recognise the salience of what might be called intersectional capitals – that is, economic, cultural and social capitals – in the formation of twenty-first century class subjects. Such an argument potentially enriches Hardt and Negri's concept of the multitude, adding an understanding of what is a global phenomenon in a British conceptualisation.

Hardt and Negri's formulation is used in Chapter One to map out class formations in Lanchester's novel, which provides a clear connection between literary form and the concept of the multitude to engage with the actualities of neoliberal capitalism and the political subjectivities as described by Hardt and Negri. The reading of *Capital* rests on its multi-perspectival narrative, imagining not a community of characters but a set of networked individual subjects who exist in a network coalesced around the space of Pepys Road. Vitally, this cast of characters does not comprise a community but individual subjects who enjoy property ownership or the potential that existing in such a space promises. Hardt and Negri focus on the multitude as a subject of resistance, but this thesis is focused more on how contemporary capitalism seeks to subordinate and maintain exploitative class

differences. It is for this reason that it adopts the conceptualisation of the precariat, a term that privileges exploitation over its potential for transformational change.

The other chapters in this thesis therefore consider the ways in which exploitation manifests in the respective texts. Ewen's text, for example, argues that neoliberalism produces a form of exploitation that mean the subject – in this chapter, the millennial – does not recognise it; the solution must always be to look to the self to resolve this exploitation, rather than confronting the failures of the market. In Chapter Three, exploitation is configured as the way in which migrants and refugees are not guaranteed basic securities. For Coe's text, exploitation is at once the experiences of the retreat of the state from economic and political life and also a cultural condition, which is necessarily punitive and coercive. The final chapter considers exploitation in terms of an under employment and as a de-humanizing process.

The Precariat

There is a disconnect between those who comprise the working class and what the working class looks

like from the perspective of traditional Marxists. For the precariat, however, identity is an essential characteristic, privileged over the radical politics it may espouse. The first stirrings of the global precariat emerged as part of the Euro-May-Day protests in the early years of this century.[124] The precariat in its incipient stage comprised several key economic-social-cultural aspects. It was a group of educated Europeans discontented by the transformation of the economy under a neoliberal ethic. It was also a group that embodied non-conventional lifestyles: one consequence saw the tension between the precariat as a victim of neoliberal policy and the institutions that implemented it, and the precariat as an avant-garde, rebellious and libertarian entity. It rejected trade unionism and the return of labourism as a viable solution to the economic challenges faced.[125] Owing to its vast, diverse, and underdeveloped political interests, the precariat appeared as a bohemian formation, unsure of its purchase as a political movement. Indeed, the precariat and the Euro-May-Day protests failed to ignite a movement or a cohesive political project. 'Even its most enthusiastic

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[124] Standing, *The Precariat*, p. 1.
[125] Standing, *The Precariat*, pp. 1-2.

protagonists would admit,' Standing documents, 'that the demonstrations so far have been more theatre than threat, more about asserting individuality and identity with a collective experience of precariousness.'[126] Standing's refrain 'when will the precariat protest?' reflects his frustration that a political project designed to meet the needs of the precariat and transform neoliberalism is not gathering momentum.[127] His book is a manifesto of sorts, which offers a strategy for how a transformative project with the precariat at its centre might be realised. This project is surely necessary, and the methods through which its goals will be realised will continue to be debated. For Standing, '[s]ymbols matter' because they are essential for fostering class identities: 'They help unite groups into something more than a multitude of strangers. They help in forging a class and building identity, fostering an awareness of commonality and a basis for solidarity or *fraternité*.'[128] This thesis provides symbols of a different sort. By offering a starting point for an interrogation of precariat characters, it seeks to initiate a critical conversation about how the precariat

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[126] Standing, *The Precariat*, p. 3.
[127] Standing, *The Precariat*, p. 122.
[128] Standing, *The Precariat*, p. 3.

emerges in fiction, what form fiction takes, and the aesthetic functions of a novel of the precariat.

One challenge, as Standing notes himself, is the contradiction inherent within the precariat of a subject both wedded to folk politics and the political project of economic liberation. He writes:

> A feature of EuroMayDay demonstrations has been their carnival atmosphere, with salsa music and posters and speeches built around mockery and humour. Many of the actions linked to the loose network behind them have been anarchic and daredevilish, rather than strategic or socially threatening.[129]

A key component of the precariat is the celebratory libertarianism associated with the carnivalesque environment in which this class is made manifest and its self-presentation as militant, ready to make political demands. The precariat is consistent with other class subjects, which are both committed to transformative politics and cautious of them. It is comprised of social, cultural and economic elements, but as a liminal subject, it is not easily situated, determined or marked by a prescriptive list of characteristics (income, cultural behaviours or interests) or a social nexus.

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[129] Standing, *The Precariat*, p. 3.

Owing to the liminal and ambiguous class characteristics of the precariat, Standing has urged caution about naming the precariat a class, but a 'class in the making', He has avoided labelling it a social condition of precariousness or precarity, because a social condition 'does not act, it does not have human agency.'[130] This thesis contests the notion of human agency in this context (as Standing does himself) but nonetheless recognises the need for the condition of precarity to be embodied in an identifiable condition, as a shared point of experience between others on local, national and international levels. The precariat has a distinctive relationship to production (economic, cultural, and social) and to neoliberalism that is constitutive of itself. Its labour is 'insecure and unstable' because it is associated 'with casualisation, informalisation, agency labour, part-time labour, phoney self-employment and the new mass phenomenon of crowd-labour.'[131] Writers, for instance, increasingly make up the precariat, as Danuta Kean shows, reporting in 2018 that 'median earnings for professional writers have plummeted by 42% since 2005 to under £10,500 a year, well below

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[130] Standing, 'The Precariat and Class Struggle', p. 3.
[131] Standing, 'The Precariat and Class Struggle', p. 3.

the minimum annual income of £17,900', and fiction detailing precariat experience is becoming progressively more visible.[132] The precariat is over-worked in ways that the proletariat has not been for decades. A reduced number of workers in business and organisations results in an over-burdensome workload for those participating in waged labour, as well as an increased expectation that workers work from home, during the evening and at weekends. Critically, capital outsources responsibility for this work to the worker: too much work results in workers being construed as failing or incapable of performing set work. In this context, members of the precariat must take on the responsibility for an increased workload during their spare time because the organisation will not employ more workers to undertake the work.

The precariat thus reflects the processual and mobile condition of neoliberalism. The precariat is becoming, and as such, has only a quasi-being. It is in process, perpetually being made. It is not an underclass but is working out what sort of economic,

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[132] Danuta Kean, 'Publishers are paying writers a pittance, say bestselling authors', *Guardian*, 27 June 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/27/publishers-pay-writers-pittance-philip-pullman-antony-beevor-sally-gardner> [accessed 30 June 2018].

social, civil, and political subject it wishes to be. The precariat is constituted by its mobility in this ontological sense, as well as the capricious, horizontal oscillations which make up its character, mirroring neoliberalism's own protean tendency. The condition of the precariat as a class-in-the-making is important to emphasise because expanding precarity undermines working-class workers, as well as professional workers and the class of managers it inevitably affects. The precariat 'rejects the old mainstream political traditions,' Standing believes; it rejects 'labourism as much as neoliberalism, social democracy as much as Christian democracy.'[133] This conceptualisation makes a study of this sort necessary as an exploration of what the precariat is or might be because crucially, the precariat is situated between capitalism and the labour movement not as Savage proposes.[134]

Standing provides three key ways in which the precariat can be located. The precariat is constituted by:

1. those dropping out of old working-class communities and families; mostly uneducated, they tend to relate their sense of deprivation and frustration to a lost *past*,

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[133] Standing, 'The Precariat and Class Struggle', p. 4.
[134] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, p. 171.

real or imagined. They thus listen to reactionary populist voices of the far-right and blame the second and even third variety of precariat for their problems.

2. migrants and minorities, who have a strong sense of relative deprivation by virtue of having no present, no home. […] Politically, they tend to be relatively passive or disengaged, except for occasional days of rage when something that appears to be a direct threat to them sparks collective anger.

3. the educated, who experience in their irregular labour and in the lack of opportunity to construct a narrative for their lives a sense of relative deprivation status frustration, because they have no sense of *future*. One might call them bohemians, but as they are the potentially transformative part of the precariat, the new vanguard, they are open to becoming the *progressives*.[135]

Historically, elements of the precariat may have occupied different positions in the class system in Britain, but under neoliberalism, insecurity in relation to labour results in an emergent class category of the precariat that cuts across traditional class lines. Class markers of education, manual labour, and migrancy become secondary in terms of a precariat characterised in relation to neoliberalism and constituted by a shared experience of exploitation and insecurity. This is not to say, however, that the precariat is not marked by difference but that the potential for a class project to emerge by relegating cultural class differences and

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[135] Standing, 'The Precariat and Class Struggle', pp. 4-5. See also Standing, *The Precariat*, pp. 13-16 and Standing, *A Precariat Charter* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 29-31.

privileging shared economic concerns marks it as a class-in-the-making. Standing's figures of the precariat inform the character types, examined and analysed in Chapters Two, Three and Four.

Standing argues that to qualify for the precariat a subject must lack at least one of the seven securities of industrial citizenship, securities that social democrats, political parties of labour and trade unions sought to realise in the last century. These forms of labour security are: labour market security; employment security; job security; work security; skill reproduction security; income security; and representation security.[136] Of course, these protections were never guaranteed to all under labourism, but under neoliberal restructuring, an ambition is to undo the premise of such guarantees altogether by allowing organisations to hire workers

[136] Labour market security refers to 'income-earning opportunities', implying that government is committed to 'full employment'; employment security relates to basic protections against arbitrary sacking, and regulation of employers practices; job security alludes to the guarantee of security in relation to the role performed, allowing for career and skill development within a specific field (and potentially, the workers preferred area of interest); work security references protections on working time, health safety and wellbeing, and compensation for failures; skill reproduction security refers to opportunities for training and retraining, skills development, and therefore indicates the promise of upward mobility; income security alludes to a basic standard of living via good wages, mechanisms to protect the minimum wage or social security guarantees; and representation security means the ability to organise in a trade union and the right to strike. See Standing, *The Precariat*, pp. 9-12.

in alternative ways to traditional models. This includes 'employees hired under alternative contract arrangements (on-call work, independent contractors) and employees hired through intermediaries (temp agencies, contract companies).'[137] A culture of insecurity is, therefore, central to precariat identities. Standing provides one example of how this insecurity bears out; 'the precariat lack[s] a work-based *identity*', he writes, 'When employed, they are in career-less jobs, without traditions of social memory, a feeling they belong to an occupational community steeped in stable practices, codes of ethics and norms of behaviour, reciprocity and fraternity.'[138] Instability as engendered by a ubiquitous impermanence results in an acute awareness that the job or role of the precariat is always temporary. It is at once rooted in the present and the result of enforced mobility.

The experience of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers complicates this picture of precarity, which is both inside and outside of market restructuring. Standing is certainly right to note the precarious experience of subjects in the Global

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[137] Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, p. 78.
[138] Standing, *The Precariat*, p. 12. Italics in the original.

South. But the experience of precarity is double, as Ronaldo Munck intelligently describes, from 'a Southern perspective' whereby 'work has always-already been precarious'.[139] This is a material actuality that amplifies Standing's analysis: 'While the precariat discourse exudes a nostalgia for something which has passed (the Keynesian/Fordist/welfare state), it does not speak to a South which never experienced welfare state capitalism.'[140] The subject of the Global South never enjoyed the fruits of welfarism, which some in the developed world were able to taste. As an economic subject, therefore, the precariat in the South is characterised by an arrangement of precariousness with global capital a totalising force that renders its subjects economically precarious and insecure in other ways too: global capitalism's involvement in the incarceration of asylum seekers and refugees, its contribution to environmental catastrophe, resulting in the impermanence of home, and its support of oppressive governments and proponents of war via the military industrial complex all contribute to the destabilisation of subjects. As such, precarity

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[139] Ronaldo Munck, 'The Precariat: a view from the South', *Third World Quarterly*, 34. 5 (2013), 747-762 (p. 752).
[140] Munck, 'The Precariat: a view from the South', p. 752.

enforces economic instability, as well as a necessary mobility, because the precariat must always be prepared to move because of social imperatives.

This thesis, therefore, takes the view that the precariat is constituted by neoliberalism – and global capitalism more generally – and because of the various ways in which precarity is produced, in terms of social and economic instability is not homogenous. Standing's insistence on a class-in-the-making conveys a hesitation to announce the precariat as a class and has led to the concept being contested. For example, Erik Olin Wright identifies problems in Standing's conceptual offer that the precariat and the working class are separate groups. Wright situates his critique in a Marxist and Weberian tradition of class analyses that insists on questions of material interest: '[T]wo people within a given class have greater overlap in their material interests than do two people in different classes'.[141] He asserts that 'to claim that the working class and the precariat are distinct classes is to claim that they have distinct material interests'

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[141] Erik Olin Wright, 'Is the Precariat a Class?', *Global Labour Journal*, 7.2 (2016), 123-135 (p. 128).

is central to his disavowal of Standing's contention that the precariat is a class.[142]

Standing deals with this assertion when arguing elsewhere that the precariat is a class-in-the-making, and when he addresses the ways in which this process bears out as four phases – rebellion, representation, recognition, and re-engagement.[143] Wright's argument that the working classes hold shared material interests with the precarious seems somewhat disingenuous on two fronts. One, such a proposal suggests that different classes do not share class interests when, for example, in the postwar period, both the working- and middle-classes benefited from an enhanced welfare state. Indeed, as Nicholas Ellison reminds us, the middle classes were the primary beneficiaries of welfarism.[144] To locate such an argument in a more contemporary setting, we may say that state funding of universities or

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[142] Wright, 'Is the Precariat a Class?', p. 128.

[143] Standing, 'The Precariat and Class Struggle', p. 15.

[144] See Ellison's discussion of Anthony Crossland's admission to this point: 'Crossland remained convinced that "the achievement of greater equality without intolerable social stress and a probably curtailment of liberty depends on economic growth'. While rapid growth would not guarantee equality – and Crosland acknowledges the dangers of bureaucracy and the advantages the middle classes had derived from the welfare state – he asserted that 'low or zero growth wholly excludes the possibility.' See Nicolas Ellison, *Egalitarian Thought and Labour Politics: Retreating Visions* (1994; London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 179-200 (p. 197). See also Tony Crosland, *A Social Democratic Britain*, Fabian Tract 404, 1971, p. 2.

membership of the European Union benefit the middle classes more than the working classes, because the former group will access higher education or enjoy the benefits of free movement more than working-class counterparts, although the working classes benefit, albeit in a reduced way. It is therefore incorrect to suggest the working and middle classes have separate interests. Two, the working class as a category indicates a specific social, economic, and cultural formation. As much as Wright legitimately wonders where 'nonmanagerial white-collar and credentialed employees in stable jobs in the state and private sectors' would be located in the hierarchy of the British class system today, it might also be wondered where the university-educated, coffee-shop barista employed on a zero hours contract would be situated within the working class.[145] To reiterate, Standing's model is predicated on the precariat as a constituted subject in relation to capital, and its current neoliberal formation, and thus where this figure is situated depends on levels of security and not the labour she performs, though of course both are factors.

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[145] Wright, 'Is the Precariat a Class?', p. 124.

I would not argue that Marxist models of analysis should be disregarded, but rather than a consideration of the current conditions of capitalism, the subjects it produces, and the ways in which subjects operate within such a system need to be considered. The problem that emerges through Standing and Wright is that the term straddles cultural class boundaries, and the literature explored in this thesis demonstrates a conscious blurring of class categories: Ewen, for example, implies that Plug has at once a modest class background and a high level of education. Saeed, a character in Hamid's novel, is coded as having a middle-class background; his father is a retired academic, and he has attended university and has a role in a marketing firm. Coe likewise provides clues to his character Val's background by gesturing to a successful music career in the past and her ability to make the right consumer choices. The older branches of the working class, Wright observes, 'have a kind of limited property right which normally is associated with owning the means of production: the right to fire an employee. They can quit, but they cannot be fired.'[146] Wright asserts that when contrasted to workers in the

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[146] Wright, 'Is the Precariat a Class?', p. 134.

precariat such workers 'occupy a privileged contradictory class location' owing to a certain security.[147] Wright appears to argue that entry into the proletariat is somehow liberatory, a view I, along with Standing, reject: workers' emancipation must develop out of the infrastructure and systems neoliberalism has created.

Wright's conclusion is that the precariat is a 'part of the working class if class is analysed in terms of the basic rules of the game of twenty-first century developed capitalism' and 'may have a particularly important role to play in struggles over the rules of capitalism and over capitalism itself', but that 'it is not a class in its own right.'[148] Perhaps conscious of how redundant this may seem, he observes that '[o]ne response to this is "so what? Who cares?"' and that we can agree class analysis is 'meant to help us develop a coherent, consistent way of theoretically understanding social cleavages and the possibilities of transformation,' and is therefore essential for the purposes of being taken seriously intellectually: 'the concepts we use have precise meanings that illuminate the nature of shared and conflicting

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[147] Wright, 'Is the Precariat a Class?', p. 134.
[148] Wright, 'Is the Precariat a Class?', pp. 134-135.

interests and potential collective capacities.'[149] It is for these reasons that, for Wright, 'treating the precariat as a class – even as a class-in-the-making – obscures more than it clarifies.'[150] Wright emphasises the need to be precise with the language of class, but fails to recognise the conceptual development made by Standing, particularly for migrants and for the educated but precariously employed. Rather, Wright seems overly committed to identifying the condition of precarity within a traditional working-class paradigm that has had the security of its contracts undermined.

Ronaldo Munck provides a more robust criticism of Standing's terminology when he argues that the precariat registers a problematic since it evokes an 'underclass', or people in the margins, and that Standing's allusion to the precariat as 'the new dangerous class' evokes nineteenth-century pathologies that were attached to the *lumpenproletariat*. For Munck, evocation of such a term can never be part of a progressive project. While acknowledging his view, I propose that this analysis misses a more crucial point, which is a need for class

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[149] Wright, 'Is the Precariat a Class?, pp. 135.
[150] Wright, 'Is the Precariat a Class?', p. 135.

terminologies to be subverted. Standing's project is designed to reinvent to provide viable class vocabularies. His evocation of the dangerous classes might also be read as a subversion of earlier, historical and problematic usage to assert a discourse of radical transformation. I am not opposed to what Munck argues but would emphasise that despite problematic histories, terms have the potential to be reinvented when reinvoiced in this moment, and specific set of conditions. Reclaimation and new application of a term may be useful in providing a language of class emancipation.

Munck proposes his own approach for revitalising class discourses. It is via trade unionism that revitalisation may occur, he seems to suggest, challenging Standing's view that trade unionism is limited. 'Even if we are pessimistic about the prospects that trade unionism might restructure and re-energise to face the new challenges to labour,' Munck writes, 'we need to acknowledge that they do make a difference for those in a precarious position in the labour market and that agency really does count in terms of shaping the future.'[151] It is worth remembering the context from which Munck is

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[151] Munck, 'The Precariat: a view from the South', p. 760.

writing is the Global South that has an altogether different labour history to that of the Global North, and specifically, Britain. We may also agree that the trade union movement is a source to mitigate neoliberalism's more damaging effects, but this approach seems to languish in a resigned politics of compromise when Munck suggests this approach 'seem[s] to be more likely to render a positive outcome than does trying to frighten the ruling order and liberal professionals with the spectre of a monster precariat.'[152] This thesis does not offer a vision for an emancipatory class politics. I am not sure that a study of the novel is the right place for such a call, but it traces the exploited class subject of contemporary capitalism and offers the precariat as an alternative for how studies of class in literary studies might revitalise the discipline.

The few studies of literary criticism that engage with the notion of the precariat gesture to Standing's work on this figure, rather than engaging with it. Liam Connell's *Precarious Labour and the Contemporary Novel* (2017) focuses on office workers globally and their representation in contemporary fiction, work that necessarily

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[152] Munck, 'The Precariat: a view from the South', pp. 760-761.

manifests as precarious labour.[153] Roberto del Valle Alcalá's *British Working-Class Fiction: Narratives of Refusal and the Struggle Against Work* (2016) resituates a Marxist analysis and charts capitalist development from the mid-twentieth century to the contemporary moment, concluding by announcing that literary texts engaging with neoliberalism rediscover vulnerability (precariousness) as a starting point for resistance.[154] In spite of naming the condition of precariousness in terms of labour as a central condition to the development of capitalist exploitation and class formation, rather Connell and Alcalá name a new class. There may be perhaps good reasons for not doing so. In the context I have outlined whereby precariousness is described as a condition rather than an embodied experience of a localised subject, but this thesis takes a different approach. It borrows from Standing's conceptual model as the structuring principle because it offers a starting point for understanding and analysing contemporary fictional characters who illustrate the precariat in complex and critical ways.

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[153] Connell, *Precarious Labour and the Contemporary Novel.*
[154] Acalá, *British Working-Class Fiction*, pp. 176-177.

As the financial crisis and Brexit indicate, a tension has emerged between a globalised world order and the more feature of more robust borders for nation states. If neoliberalism understands the borders of the nation-state as porous to describe the present condition of capitalism, the focus on Britain raises a potential problem. Usefully raised by Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl in designating the 'neoliberal novel', they attempt to conceptualise 'a body of writing not fully accounted for by oversimplified models of resistance or capitulation, or by models of national or diasporic literature.'[155] Recognisable models are 'stale' and 'vague', Johansen and Karl suggest, and new forms must be theorised, although somewhat confusingly, they seem disinterested in claiming that neoliberalism produces novel shifts in either the form or content of fictions. Consistent with neoliberalism's dominant impulse to move freely across borders in pursuit of its ultimate – yet unrealisable – goal, Johansen and Karl's valuable approach reflects the constitutive elements of neoliberalism at the same time as acknowledging how these texts operate in such a global context. Yet, and where globalisation studies

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[155] Johansen and Karl, 'Introduction', p. 205.

have been limited more generally, Johansen and Karl remain committed to overlooking the ways in which class operates within the nation state.[156]

Writing in England

The texts at the centre of this thesis engage to various extents with London as a metropolitan and urban space. These texts do not occur in Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland, and as such, risks methodological imprecision. Yet, this actuality is perhaps understandable, given London as a focal point for class inequalities. As it has been recently noted, renters in London will soon overtake homeowners in London.[157] London, therefore, becomes a geographical focal point – where the order is exposed dramatically. This thesis is not focused on London as a particular area, but inevitably, the conceptual models with which I am working finds its way to the capital. London is also a significant venue because it is central to the crash: the City is embedded

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[156] See John Smith, *Imperialism in the 21st Century: Globalisation, Super-Exploitation, and Capitalism's Final Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016).

[157] Isabelle Fraser, 'Generation Rent: London to become a city of renters by 2025', *Telegraph*, 16 February 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/property/property-market/12157946/Generation-Rent-London-to-become-a-city-of-renters-by-2025.html> [accessed 14 July 2019].

in London's vibrant cultural life, as the discussion of Ewen's text shows.

I have suggested that this thesis is preoccupied with the contemporary moment, but what is meant here by the contemporary? For some time, the contemporary was understood to refer to postwar writing, but, as James F. English argues, by the mid-1980s, published work in history, geography, economics, sociology, and literary criticism recognised the 1970s as a pivotal moment, a significant shift away from the economic, cultural, social and political arrangement of the postwar years to a new era, resulting changes in economics, ideology, society and culture.[158] This new arrangement – which here I have described principally through the formation of neoliberalism – is attached to the emergence of a 'postmodern, postindustrial, postcolonial, and postnational era.'[159] If the emergence of neoliberalism in Britain has been identified as a sea change for the critical analyses of culture, when it manifests in literary culture, it is more challenging. The Booker Prize confirmed a new

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[158] James F. English, 'Introduction: British Fiction in a Global Frame', in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 1-15 (pp. 1-2).
[159] English, 'Introduction: British Fiction in a Global Frame', p. 2.

literary order in the early 1980s. The 'two-horse race' between William Golding's *Rites of Passage* (1980) (the ultimate winner) and Anthony Burgess's *Earthly Powers* (1980), in retrospect seemed to announce the end of an era, especially given the success the following year of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). For James Brooker, Rushdie's 'vision of independent India' represented 'a change from, even a challenge to, the writing about Anglo-Indian relations which had prospered in the previous decade.'[160] Rushdie was also 'a self-proclaimed radical hostile to Thatcher and her government'.[161] Rushdie's win ushered in a new era of young and politically positioned writers.

Locating 'the genesis of a contemporary British condition', Peter Boxall describes the contemporary beginning 'at the turn of the 1980s', a decade which ushered in the cultural formation which still dominate[s] cultural and socio-economic life today.'[162] Boxall rightly suggests that the 1980s designates a social, cultural, economic, and political formation that cannot be divorced from thee re-

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[160] James Brooker, *Literature of the 1980s: After the Watershed* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 32.
[161] Brooker, *Literature of the 1980s*, p. 32.
[162] Boxall, 'Introduction: Framing the Present,' p. 3.

shaping of life in Britain that neoliberalism introduced. Although understood as a period of stability with the benefit of hindsight, the 2000s are characterised by the troubling of this arrangement: the bursting of the dotcom bubble, 9/11, the invasion of Iraq, and the financial crisis all tested the cohesiveness of the contemporary. Though Robin Van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen note the 2000s as a period where these concerns emerge beginning with the anti-globalisation protests that 'neatly bookend the 2000s' (and incidentally, coincide with the beginning of Standing's account), they contend that the aforementioned crises 'should not be seen as a series of unrelated events but rather should be conceptualised as interlocking dialectical movements across spatial scales, temporal cycles and [operating at the] techno-economic, cultural, and institutional level.'[163] Recognising the way in which events, moments, and other indicators of historicity do not neatly fit into a single occurrence, they point out the need to recognise unevenness.

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[163] Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, 'Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism', in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism*, ed. by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), pp. 1-19 (p. 12).

This implication is consistent with the fluidity gestured to in the interrogation of neoliberalism. But as it has also been made clear, this thesis is concerned with the moment after the financial crisis. This thesis is primarily focused on the financial crisis, culture, and literary texts that respond to it. The texts in this thesis cover a fifteen-year period between 2004 and 2019. Most of the texts are post-2008 and are engaged with the themes outlined here. I have also included Kunzru's *Transmission* from 2004. On the face of it, this selection may seem an odd choice because it appears four years prior to the collapse of the global economy, but the decision to include it here was made because it not only speaks to the themes of the post-crash moment – the tensions with Europe, migration, and the question of the free movement of people – but it also anticipates the threat posed to the border along southern Europe.

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Chapter One maps out the cultural context of the early twenty-first century in Britain and focuses in particular on the discourse of the classless society. It locates John Lanchester's 2012 novel *Capital*, described as an example of 'Crunch Lit' by Shaw, and as a novel concerned with financial risk, and a

recognition of inequality via its adoption of a form of realism, this chapter examines the ways in which *Capital* reflects early-century notions of classlessness via the formal multi-perspectival narrative in the text. [164] A formal characteristic of earlier class texts, in the cultural context of early-twenty-first century Britain, neoliberalism gestures to the paradoxical status of a sense of collective responsibility and a profound adherence to individuality.[165] Reading this idea through Hardt and Negri's conceptualisation of the multitude, the chapter argues that the financial crisis marks a fragmentation of the cultural construct of classlessness. It is from this groundwork that the thesis considers the potentiality of the precariat in fiction characterised by exploitation.

Chapter Two focuses on the first of these figures, through the millennial, a cultural phenomenon identified variously as constituting a

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[164] Barbara Korte, 'John Lanchester's *Capital*: financial risk and its counterpoints', *Textual Practice*, 31.3 (2017), 491-504; Catherine Bernard, 'Writing Capital, or, John Lanchester's Debt to Realism', *Études Anglaises*, 68.2 (2015), 143-155; J. Russel Perkin, 'John Lanchester's *Capital*: A Dickensian Examination of the Condition of England', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 41.1 (2017), 110-117.

[165] See Barker, *Union Street.*

class subject.[166] Building on the conceptual material examined in Chapter One it recognises the prospect of social mobility in terms of a socially aspirational millennial subject. Specifically, it claims the millennial as a product of neoliberalism with its operating impulse encapsulating a neoliberal selfhood. By focusing on Ben Masters' *Noughties* as a starting point and as a lens through which to interpret the millennial as a cultural phenomenon, I claim the figure as narcissistic, devoid of personal or professional development, and hedonistic. *Noughties* is a typical example of the preoccupation with the self in fiction about millennials. I then go onto examine Francis Plug the protagonist of Paul Ewen's *Francis Plug: How To Be A Public Author* as the figure par excellence of neoliberalism: *homo oeconomicus*. Focusing on forms of exploitation bound up with the millennial, including mental health, burnout, and a false commitment to meritocratic principles – this chapter locates the experience of the millennial in the post-crash moment. Moreover, it examines Ewen's novel in terms of its engagement with the Booker Prize, with the conceptual object of the prize read as

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[166] See Pakulski and Waters, *The Death of Class*, pp. 64-65; Standing, *Precariat*, p. 59, pp. 65-67; Savage et al, *Social Class in the 21ˢᵗ Century*, p. 52.

a metaphor for the economy under neoliberalism. Charting Plug's blind commitment to pursue a clearly unattainable prize, it locates the millennial as a horizontally mobile, and aspirational subject of neoliberalism, unable to recognise the impossibility of aspirationalism.

Chapter Three examines Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* together with Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*. Framing by capitalism's reliance on cheap migrant labour, with refugees and asylum seekers discursive scapegoats, I argue that these three figures should be understood as indistinguishable from capitalism's drives and desires. As Imogen Tyler notes, a deliberate strategy of the New Labour government and the mainstream media outlets wants to invent public hysteria in order to reorient working-class antagonism from the migrant – upon whose labour capital relies – to the asylum seeker. This narrative is crucial because the asylum seeker and refugee were discursively conflated at the same time as they were rendered a class subject, necessarily reliant on state support for housing, training, and subsistence. This figure, therefore, is situated in a

class discourse of insecurity.[167] This kind of
materialist analysis is a trend in contemporary
criticism, particularly in studies of postcolonial
texts.[168] After establishing the migrant, refugee, and
asylum seeker as a class subject, this chapter reads
the primary texts through Agamben's concept of
homo sacer, the figure from Roman law who may be
killed but not sacrificed. Tracing geopolitical events
of (forced) migration, it argues that such a precarious
figure is characterised by the paradoxical actualities
of mobility – she is, for Agamben, 'in perpetual
flight' – and detention.[169] It concludes by considering
the new societal forms this figure may be seen to
carve out within the existing structures of capitalist
society.

In Chapter Four, I focus on the figure of the
precariat that, as Standing suggests, 'experience[s] a
sense of relative deprivation' because 'They, their
parents or grandparents belonged to working-class
occupations, with status, skill, and respect.'[170] I read

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[167] Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (London: Zed, 2013), p. 84.
[168] The Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development*; Melissa Kennedy, 'Postcolonial Economics: Literary Critiques of Inequality', in *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Postcolonial Writing: New Contexts, New Narratives, New Debates*, ed. by Jenni Ramone (London: Palgrave, 2018), pp. 54-69 (p. 58).
[169] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 183.
[170] Standing, *A Precariat Charter*, p. 29.

Val Doubleday the characters in Jonathan Coe's 2015 novel *Number 11* as encapsulating this figure. Val comes to represent this figure in terms of downward mobility in the context of austerity policy. Therefore, this chapter focuses on two key dynamics of this experience. Val is rendered as this class subject, not in terms of familial lineage but rather by codes of working-class cultural identity. I identify this identity in relation to her experience as a subject of austerity, her appearance on a reality television show, and the novel's coding of her as the 'chav mother'. Taken together, these two experiences emphasise an inescapable circularity, which I understand as bound up with narratives of class experience, such as 'the cycle of poverty' as well as identifying the continued tendency of horizontal mobility.

The final chapter of the thesis brings together themes and issues discussed in the preceding chapters and claims the precariat can also be recognised in terms of a unique temporality, which is named here as a 'hyper present'. By this I mean that under neoliberalism, increased precarity results in a poverty of time. Standing observes, 'Someone who exists through temporary jobs must spend a lot of time searching for jobs and dealing with the state

bureaucracy or, increasingly, its private commercial surrogates.'[171] Time, thus, becomes a precious commodity and a site of class privilege. This chapter takes this view as a starting point to discuss the poverty of time in relation to the millennial, the circularity of class experience, and refugee experience through Ali Smith's *Spring* and Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut*. It brings together strands from the preceding chapters through the lens of time. One argument this thesis makes is the salience of the precariat as a product of neoliberalism. The final chapter upends this idea by mapping the analysis of the precariat as a subject of the present onto the cultural moment with which this thesis is concerned. Examining the ways in which *Spring* and *The Cut* present an 'ongoing present' in Lauren Berlant's terms, I argue the post-crash cultural moment is routed in a static and unchanging present.[172]

The Coda begins to consider developments that have occurred since this research started by focusing on anti-globalist sentiment attached to Britain and the United States, the standard-bearers of neoliberalism, and the drive to neo-protectionist

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[171] Standing, *The Precariat*, p. 120.

[172] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 15.

ideas on trade and free movement. It includes a discussion of Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019) and gestures towards the rural novel as a potential future for class fiction in Britain.

Chapter One

<u>From the Classless Society to the Precariat in John</u>

<u>Lanchester's *Capital* (2012)</u>

> Jane, Jeremy and Fiona all saw themselves as being clearly in the middle of the [class] spectrum, despite being in fundamentally different economic positions.
>
> Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century* (2015)

As the millennium arrived, the view was that class had died in Britain. This apparent consensus permeated popular culture, political life, and public discourse and was evident in an intellectual retreat from the subject.[173] Class was redistributed in what was seen as an increasingly globalized system of material and immaterial production, distribution, and consumption.[174] In the British context, where class

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[173] Andrew Adonis and Stephen Pollard, *A Class Act: The Myth of Britain's Classless Society* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1997) Helen Jones (ed), *Towards a Classless Society?* (London: Routledge, 1997) Alwyn W. Turner, *A Classless Society: Britain in the 1990s* (London: Aurum, 2013); Paul Kingston, *The Classless Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Ulrich Beck, 'Beyond Class and Nation: Reframing Social Inequalities in a Globalizing World', *British Journal of Sociology*, 58.4 (2007), 679-705; David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (New York: Vintage, 1990); David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (London: Penguin, 1998); David Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1999); Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000*, pp. 49-82; Head, 'The Demise of Class Fiction', p. 246.

[174] For example, see Standing, *The Precariat*, p. 5; Manfred B. Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 38-42. John Smith's work is particularly instructive about the emergence of redistributed labour, although for him, it is 'outsourced.' See Smith, *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century* pp. 9-38, pp. 39-67.

discourse survived, it did so via the 'underclass' as a cultural phenomenon, rather than as an economic category, and re-made economic success a consequence of economic choice.[175] For example, as Arun Kundnani puts it, according to the prevailing logic, 'you've only got yourselves to blame.'[176] This chapter traces its genealogy in literary studies and explores how the emergence of classlessness, centred on the nominal notion of meritocracy and the privileging of identity as a key concern in this moment, helped to establish a new political landscape. In this chapter, I consider Lanchester's novel *Capital* alongside the concept of classlessness. By providing a close reading of *Capital* in relation to classlessness, captured in early twenty-first century Britain under New Labour rule, the novel names the characters – who constitute various economic, cultural, and social

Other contemporary critics of neoliberalism note the salience of the Bretton Woods conference and the work of transforming a marginal idea into mainstream economic policy, including the role central banks played in debt management in developing nations. 'The principle was simple: countries in crisis desperately need emergency aid to stabilize their currencies. When privatization and free-trade policies are packaged together with a financial bailout, countries have little choice but to accept the whole package.' Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 164.

[175] Arun Kundnani, '"Stumbling on": race, class and England', *Race & Class*, 41.4 (2000), 1-18 (pp. 3-5) Head, 'The Demise of Class Fiction', p. 230; Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture*, p. 47, pp. 85-90.

[176] Kundnani, '"Stumbling on": race, class and England', pp. 3-5.

differences – as subjects of the classless society. It also investigates the neoliberal dynamic of a text that presents a narrative of individualised and networked subjects. This chapter, however, begins by revisiting working-class texts from the postwar and early period of neoliberalisation to map out the origins of the cultural formation of the classless society. It concludes at the pivotal moment of the financial crisis and in Lanchester's novel where resurgent vocabularies of class are explored.

In 'The Demise of Class Fiction', Dominic Head asserts three key aspects of the decline of class and the literary forms responding to social, economic and cultural events: postwar affluence, post-Thatcherite underclass experience, and middle-class complicity in the global economic order. Setting himself against the notion that postwar working-class fiction constituted a working-class literary renaissance, Head argues that the economic, social and cultural changes brought about by the 1945-51 Labour governments – a national health service, enhanced social mobility, and improved working and living conditions – enabled the undoing of class distinctions and anticipated a future, fragmented class identity and experience. This condition, he

argues, is evident in postwar working-class texts that focus on 'the actual, or impending break-up of that identity, clearly signalling the demise of the world they evoke so vividly – and thus anticipating the novels of the 1980s and 1990s.'[177] John Braine's protagonist in *Room at the Top* (1957) harbours a conservative, and specifically proto-Thatcherite, entrepreneurial ethic, determined to transcend the council estate to become middle-class and affluent.[178] Joe's ultimate position in the novel – married to Susan with a 'thousand a year' – implies that working-class experience is attached to a narrative of escape, meritocratic values, and an aspirational individualism. In another sense, Joe signifies the ambitions of a Marxist revolutionary, seeking to eradicate class differences, but as executed within a capitalist framework of aspirational self-determination where inequality must exist for him to thrive. In contrast, in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) Alan Sillitoe portrays Arthur Seaton's anarchist politics as seeking to dismantle parliament, and redistribute wealth to benefit himself. Arthur also harbours a patriarchal desire to have

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[177] Head, 'The Demise of Class Fiction', p. 231.

[178] John Braine, *Room at the Top* (1957; London: Arrow Books, 2002), p. 148.

several wives.[179] Ultimately Arthur conforms to 1950s' social mores – marriage, labour, children – but, as in Braine's novel, there is a sense, however misguided, of the limitless possibilities being available to working-class white men in a moment of postwar affluence.

Braine and Sillitoe's texts were reflecting a sociological and journalistic consensus in the postwar period that would seem to confirm what Head calls 'the swansong of a literary mode with a backward-looking impetus.'[180] Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) confirms this sense of there being a level playing field: 'It is often said that there are no working-classes in England now', Hoggart writes that 'a "bloodless revolution" has taken place which has so reduced social differences that already most of us inhabit an almost flat plain, the plain of the lower middle- to middle-classes.'[181] It is striking to see this claim in the mid-twentieth-century because it would be asserted again fifty years later.[182] The re-

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[179] Alan Sillitoe, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958; London: Harper Perennial, 2008).

[180] Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000*, p. 72.

[181] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life* (1957; London: Penguin, 2009), p. 3.

[182] Helen Jones is keen to note Major's deliberate framing: 'class mobility, not classlessness', she

emergence of this narrative in the 1950s registers a sense of how 'classlessness' is deployed and where it gains credibility in economic, cultural, social and political contexts.

If Head claims that symbols of working-class literary production celebrate a literary mode and concomitantly announce its demise, Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters argue that 'class died somewhere between the beginning of the twentieth century and the end of the Great Depression' amid workers' struggles:

> with the emergence of fascist and socialist states that so dominated civil society, with the institutionalization of corporatist deals that linked government, capital and labour into common projects with the mitigation of the effects of the market through such institutions as citizenship and welfare, and with the domination of the planet by superpower politics.[183]

Identifying conditions that Hoggart describes as manifest by the late 1950s, class is assumed to have

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writes. 'The way in which John Major equates 'classlessness' with opportunity within a class-structured society was underlined at the 1996 Conservative Party Conference where he spoke, under the slogan 'Opportunity for All', of creating an 'opportunity-owning democracy" in which all people would have the "opportunity and choice, to open up an avenue of hope in their lives.' Not only is the concept evoked again a half-century later, but it is interestingly framed in the same terms: society (government) has facilitated such opportunity and the individual only need make the effort to take it. See 'Helen Jones', 'Introduction', in *Towards a Classless Society*, ed. by Helen Jones (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1-12 (pp. 1-2).

[183] Pakulski and Waters, *The Death of Class*, pp. 25-26.

lost its salience because of the proletariat's inclusion in institutions Pakulski and Walters surface. In their formulation, the Labour Party's slow electoral gains, beginning in 1892 with Keir Hardie's election to parliament, and the increasing influence of the trade union movement in securing victories for workers, oversees the amelioration of working-class experience and its delegitimation as an ontological, experiential, and conceptual category. One consequence of their claim is the refutation of class in the context of neoliberal Britain. 'Both the left and the right are abandoning their pre-occupation with class issues,' Pakulski and Walters claim; the 'right is turning its attention to morality and ethnicity while the critical left is becoming increasingly concerned about issues of gender, ecology, citizenship and human rights.'[184] This shift is also evident in the very institutions Pakulski and Waters regard as delegitimating class: Neil Kinnock began the process of the Labour Party's rightward move in the 1980s, foreshadowing New Labour's embracing of neoliberal economics and abandonment of Clause IV (the Labour Party's constitutional commitment to socialist principles of nationalisation and shared

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[184] Pakulski and Waters, *The Death of Class*, p. 1.

wealth[185]). Moreover, the defeat of the National Union of Mineworkers during the year-long strike of 1984-1985 was the death knoll of the trade union movement and organised labour.[186] It is a paradox, then, that in the moment in which class is declared dead – and with legitimacy as post-Fordism began to absorb old industries and produce new forms of precarious labour founded on perceptions of mobile social and economic capital – the post-mortem took place.

Class issues were focused on an intensified commodification and consumption, increased access to capital via the individual acquisition of debt, and acceptance of middle-class modes of identification. Head's analysis of Sillitoe's sequel to *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, Birthday* (2002), registers the emptiness of millennial texts that articulate the realisation of working-class aspiration (Arthur's older brother Brian describes himself as 'of no class at all').[187] In contrast, other fiction in this cultural

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[185] Generally understood as Clause IV, it is Part Four that the right had for decades sought to eliminate; this part referred to 'the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange.' See Peter Riddell, 'The End of Clause IV, 1994-95', *Contemporary British History*, 11.2 (1997), 24-49 (p. 24).

[186] Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (London: Allen Lane, 2015), pp. 92-93.

[187] Head, 'The Demise of Class Fiction', p. 239.

moment concerns the underclass experience, the miserable - yet humorous - poverty-driven narratives of writers such as Pat Barker and Irvine Welsh. In *Union Street*, Barker represents the different experiences of working-class women, coalesced around a single street in the North of England: a girl is raped, one woman is left widowed, and the oldest of the cast is left to die through neglect at the novel's close. Each chapter focuses on a different woman's experience in the street, starting from the youngest and concluding with the oldest. The text presents a series of wretched events, not only rape, but the death of a husband and extreme poverty. It is Kelly Brown and Alice Bell's final meeting, however, as Alice is dying, that ties the narrative together – 'the withered hand and the strong young hand met and joined'.[188] Barker implies the experiences will continue in a never-ending cycle and Union Street is thus a far cry from the vision of working-class aspiration advanced in postwar texts. As Thatcherism - and its principles of individual mobility - scrabbled for hegemony in Britain in the 1980s, *Union Street* shows such dreams remain unachievable for this cast of characters, and life will continue in a never-ending circle. Welsh's

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[188] Barker, *Union Street*, p. 265.

Trainspotting, on the other hand, gestures to previous narratives of aspiration.[189] Welsh portrays a group of heroin addicts in Glasgow. Symbolic of the decadent hedonism introduced by a vigorous consumer culture, the characters depicted are narcissistic, violent and workless. Yet, Renton's decision to steal the money he and his friends make in London on a heroin deal and escape to mainland Europe confirms a desire that can be located in *Room at the Top*. Crucially, such an ambition to escape cannot be achieved in Britain but abroad. Britain itself, then, appears as a site of entrapment for such figures.

Stephanie Lawler believes that 'the end of class' signifies a more complex understanding of inequality that recognises inequality as operating beyond economic inequity and 'as circulating through symbolic and cultural forms.'[190] For Lawler, symbolic and cultural forms are 'the means by which people become judged as morally worthwhile, or as having the right kind of knowledge or taste"'.[191] This approach is indebted to Pierre Bourdieu's work and endures in sociological work where class is

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[189] Welsh, *Trainspotting*.
[190] Lawler, 'Introduction: Class, Culture and Identity', p. 797.
[191] Lawler, 'Introduction: Class, Culture and Identity', p. 797.

understood at the nexus of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital.[192] For Lawler, however, inequality suggests the absence of cultural and social forms of capital, which are necessarily related to economic capital, and confirms a shift to a politics of identity. In class terms, this politics focuses on the figure of the underclass, suggested in Barker's and Welsh's novels, and in particular its re-making into the chav, that is, the subject of underclass experience who embraces consumer culture, Beverley Skeggs, for instance, has noted this figure via the reviled hen party, Imogen Tyler and Bruce Bennett identify her in the 'Celebrity Chav', and Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine examine how working-class women are imbricated in 'reflexive selfhood' or 'self-transformation' via reality TV shows which remake working-class women within the frame of neoliberal femininity.[193] Each of these practices anticipate what

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[192] Will Atkinson, *Class* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015); Savage et al, *Social Class in the 21st Century.*

[193] Skeggs' article on hen parties considers the moralising tone about the class- and gender-based disgust directed at participants in the hen party. Although she does not name it as such, this phenomenon was situated within a wider moral panic about the cultural figure, the 'ladette.' See Bev Skeggs, 'The Making of Class and Gender through Visualizing Moral Subject Formation', *Sociology*, 39.5 (2005), 965-982. See Tyler and Bennet's case study of Kerry Katona: Imogen Tyler and Bruce Bennett, '"Celebrity Chav": Fame, femininity and social class', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13.3 (2010), 375-393, (pp. 382-390). Ringrose and Walkerdine's excellent essay continues the neoliberal thread of improvement of the self for working-class women. As they conclude, 'the makeover shows

Koray Çalışkan and Michel Callon describe as a shifting of attention away from economic processes to economization, with the sense of class as economic deprivation and etched on the body in the form of tattoos, piercings, hair-styles, and clothing.[194] This kind of cultural marking returns to Bourdieu the idea of good and bad consumer choices which reveal 'distinctions' between classes.[195]

Distinction was the primary way in which class informed literary and cultural criticism, with class a cultural identity, performed through consumer codes and a focus on poverty and economics, is replaced by one on the classed subject as abject.[196] She is regarded when she makes the wrong, tasteless consumer choices (sportswear, for instance), clearly identifiable by the more culturally rich middle classes.[197] Indeed, policy proposals sought to

offer glimpses of a central dynamic through which neo-liberal logics of individual improvement operate' and 'how working-class women are the primary "vessels" of transformation.' See Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine, 'Regulating the Abject: The TV make-over as site of neo-liberal reinvention towards bourgeois femininity', *Feminist Media Studies*, 8.3 (2008), 227-246, (p. 242).

[194] Koray Çalışkan and Michel Callon, 'Economization, Part I: Shifting Attention from the Economy Towards Processes of Economization', p. 370.

[195] Bourdieu, *Distinctions*, p. 8.

[196] Ringrose and Walkerdine, 'Regulating the Abject'.

[197] Skeggs writes: 'It is not just a matter of obtaining objects and knowing how to use, play, experiment with them; rather, how they are conceptualized (objectified) by relations to other is what matters.' See Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture*, p. 141.

capitalise on the emergence of this abject figure. In *The People*, Selina Todd returns to the narrative of the classless society, its rise in the 1990s because of John Major's determination to create a society in his own image, and Tony Blair's aim to tackle poverty and social exclusion, rather than closing the (economic) inequality gap.[198] New Labour's commitment to the free market meant such an ambition was unrealistic. 'In practice,' Todd writes brutally, 'the government was more concerned with addressing and penalizing the behaviour of ordinary people than that of boardroom grandees.'[199] Now infamous, Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) were introduced to curb anti-social behaviour, people on benefits derided as scroungers, and a wrongful consensus emerged that a quarter of the welfare budget was awarded to illegitimate claimants.

The kind of class subject, the figure of the abject, the chav, the underclass, was necessary to justify focus on the 'middle mass' of 'ordinary people' in Britain.[200] 'Ordinariness', Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite contends, was 'claimed by both

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[198] Todd, *The People*, pp. 339-340.

[199] Todd, *The People*, p. 340.

[200] Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics, and the Decline of Deference in England, 1968-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 206.

the middle and the working classes in the late twentieth century'. Ostensibly unified class differences, reconstituted ordinariness so that it included shipyard workers, office workers, and professionals, as well as the rich.[201] The classless society comes to function as an impressive counterpoint to the vivid way class appears to be written on the body, in the way homes are decorated, where people holiday, *how* people holiday, where they socialise, and what they do in their spare time, thereby enabling class to be obfuscated, and perceptible only in the wretched subjects of an underclass. '[S]uch discourses of classless "ordinariness"', Sutcliffe-Braithwaite stresses, 'could help to *mask* the significance of rising inequality.'[202] By redirecting animosity to benefit claimants, economic inequality could be hidden, as could other class concerns, such as precarization, trade union affiliation, and political representation.

In the late 1990s, David Cannadine was right to declare that the three-tiered class system of old, comprised of the working-, middle-, and upper-

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[201] Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics, and the Decline of Deference in England*, p. 205.

[202] Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics, and the Decline of Deference in England*, p. 206. Italics in the original.

classes, was an 'over-simplification'.[203] In this moment, the 'middle mass' of people captured something of the situation. Will Atkinson perceives the ordinariness Sutcliffe-Braithwaite identifies in everyday culture and social conduct: 'everyone wears jeans, everyone watches football, football programmes use classical music as their theme tunes, professors listen to pop and rock music and so on.'[204] Ordinariness allows for obfuscation, with the perception of classlessness, in turn, enabling the semblance of equality of opportunity. A 'middle mass' is privileged by the early twenty-first century, and Philip Mirowski offers a trenchant analysis of the condition: 'One major cultural development over the last three decades is that the only permissible mention of "class" in the economic sense has been the utterly superfluous habit of treating oneself and others as solidly "middle class."'[205] To be defined outside of this middle mass produces two odd effects. 'The rich and the poor have become so evanescent as mental categories that they are rarely ever accorded the right to occupy space in the real world,' Mirowski

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[203] David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 20.
[204] Atkinson, *Class*, p. 13.
[205] Mirowski, *Never Let A Serious Crisis Go To Waste*, p. 117.

suggests.[206] In his assessment, 'The rich are continually quoted as not feeling "really" rich, while the poor are cued to deny that they are poor, to avoid opprobrium. If they confess to poverty, they are examined for personal feelings, rather than class membership.'[207] To attach an experience to a class outside of this amorphous and ill-defined middle is illegitimate under neoliberal logic. As Mirowski points out, in a neoliberal formulation 'The *only* class in which one can safely profess membership is the "middle class," or the class of no class.'[208] In Thatcher's words, class 'groups people together and sets them against each other', in the context of class denial, class discourse paradoxically seeks to homogenizes different experiences, classes, cultures, genders and sets them not against themselves.[209]

Class conflict is inherently personal within a 'middle mass' of cultural indistinction. In John Lanchester's Capital, it is played out on a single street in London, Pepys Road, in and around which all the action of the novel takes place. Petunia Howe was

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[206] Mirowski, *Never Let A Serious Crisis Go To Waste*, p. 117.
[207] Mirowski, *Never Let A Serious Crisis Go To Waste*, p. 117.
[208] Mirowski, *Never Let A Serious Crisis Go To Waste*, p. 117.
[209] Margaret Thatcher, 'Don't undo my work', *Newsweek*, 27 April 1992, <www.margaretthatcher.org/document/111358> [accessed 31 October 2015].

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born on the street and has lived there her entire life,
The Kamals run the newsagents, other residents
include, a banker, Roger, and his wife Arabella Yount
and their two children, and a Senegalese footballer
Freddie Kamo. An asylum seeker Quentina Mkfesi, a
builder Zbigniew, and Smitty, an anonymous street
artist, who is Petunia's grandson are among various
visitors to the street. Together, these characters
represent a snapshot of cosmopolitan London
because for Lanchester, *Capital* is a 'long realist
novel about contemporary London' in the manner of
Dickens[210] It is, therefore, implicitly about class.
Lanchester's aim was, 'I wanted the novel to feel like
London feels to me':

> It had to feel, if not crowded, then thoroughly
> populated; its characters had to be from a wide
> range of backgrounds and homelands; and it
> had to be set in one particular street, because
> the geographical unit of city life is the street.[211]

For Lanchester, Pepys Road serves as a microcosm
for London as a dynamic, global city, and reflects the
busyness, dynamism, and diversity encapsulated in
the capital in the early twenty-first century. But

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[210] John Lanchester, 'John Lanchester on Capital – Guardian book club', *Guardian*, 8 March 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/mar/08/john-lanchester-capital-book-club> [accessed 30 October 2015].
[211] Lanchester, 'John Lanchester on Capital – Guardian book club'.

Capital also reflects the classless society, first, in a cast of disaggregated individuals of different social and economic backgrounds, and second, by a shared focal point: Pepys Road. Individual subjects within this homogenizing residential zone.

It is the street, and specifically the houses, that symbolise the classless society in *Capital*. As Andrew Adonis and Stephen Pollard argue, the classless society 'is not a society without classes, but the age-old goal of a meritocratic society providing means for people to advance by ability regardless of class origins.'[212] In *Capital*, there are two possible sources for advancement: hard work and property ownership. This chapter will explore both for how this novel captures aspects of the classless society. Zbigniew has come to London to make his fortune: 'Zbigniew's plan was as follows: to make enough money in London to go into the lift-maintenance business with his father'. If he succeeds, both he and his father will live handsomely in Poland.[213] As a site that enables working-class migrants to achieve their economic goals, *Capital* echoes nineteenth-century

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[212] Andrew Adonis and Stephen Pollard, *A Class Act: They Myth of the Classless Society* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1997), p. 15.

[213] Lanchester, 'John Lanchester on Capital – Guardian book club'; Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 75.

literature where London (and Britain) is a site where economic dreams of aspiration, may be realised through hard work, but as Dickens made clear, this was rarely the case.[214]

The stock figure of the asylum seeker is also presented in this aspirational vein: 'Quentina Mkfesi BSc, MSc (Political Science, University of Zimbabwe, thesis subject: Post-Conflict Resolution in Non-Post-Colonial Societies, with special reference to Northern Ireland, Spain, Chile)'.[215] She is a political refugee in Britain, who fled because of her agitation against the Mugabe regime. Quentina's introduction into the novel via her educational achievements strongly implies – in a context of New Labourism – that she is a figure of aspiration, transcending the British class system, and a global expression of it, too. Lanchester emphasises Quentina's work ethic, contesting her supposed status as a benefit scrounger and situates her as hard

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[214] While Dickens certainly showed upward class mobility was possible as with Pip in *Great Expectations* or Oliver in *Oliver Twist*, they ultimately achieved this affluent end because of a benefactor. Other characters were not so fortunate. For example, in *Bleak House* (1853), Jo dies unceremoniously in the street during winter; in *Little Dorrit* (1857), Amy and Arthur end up poor. See Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (London: Penguin, 2003); Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, (London: Penguin, 1987).

[215] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 51; see also Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 146.

working: 'With Christmas on Tuesday, plenty of people would be starting the holiday today, and getting a full two weeks off. Quentina felt no resentment. She envied people's work, not their leisure'.[216] Lanchester explores the brutal experience of asylum seekers in Britain, bound up with the threat of detention and emphasises Quentina's interest in securing status and political safety, by working illegally through an intermediary, Kwame Lyons.

Individual aspirations are hardly realised and, instead of showing hard work as the mechanism through which class is transcended, *Capital* implies it is property ownership that confirms the likelihood of such an ideal. In the first place, the history of Pepys Road is traced from its genesis to its latter-day emergence as a site for the superrich: 'the houses were the backdrop to their [the residents'] lives: they were an important part of life but they were set were a set where events took place, rather than the principal characters.'[217] Houses take on added significance following the 1970s' property boom: 'the houses had become so valuable to people who already lived in them, and so expensive for people

[216] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 129.
[217] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 5.

who had recently moved into them, that they had become central actors in their own right.'[218] *Capital* confirms the importance of property as a way of registering how prosperity intervenes in classlessness by elevating the street to the status of character. It is the focus of the Prologue where characters are left anonymised.

In the Prologue, *Capital* begins to chart the introduction of neoliberal economic principles. 'It would be hard to put your finger on the exact point when Pepys Road began its climb up the economic ladder', Lanchester writes, but 'it tracked the change in Britain's prosperity, emerging from the dowdy chrysalis of the late 1970s and transforming into a vulgar, loud butterfly of the Thatcher decades and the long boom that followed.'[219] With neoliberal economic principles the catalyst for the exponential rise in house prices in the forty years since, the street is emblematic of staggering inequality. Indeed, it is the distinction between who lives in and who owns property on the street that is emblematic of the 'winners and losers' of British society in the early

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[218] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 5.
[219] Lanchester, *Capital*, pp. 2-3.

twenty-first century.[220] There is a sense that the working classes do exist, but they do not, potentially, cannot, exist in this space: 'As house prices rose, the working classes, indigenous and immigrant, cashed in and moved out, usually looking to find bigger houses in quieter places, with neighbours like themselves', Lanchester observes.[221] The implication, as *Capital* concludes, is that 'all the people in the street, just by living there, had won'.[222]

In one sense, *Capital* establishes and invokes the classless society by proposing both a financially provident working class in the form of migrant labour; in another sense, the notion of classlessness is bound into a set of asset-rich subjects: 'all people had to do was sit there and imagine the cash value of their homes rattling upwards so fast that they couldn't see the figures go round.'[223] Against the notion of the classless society that was advanced by Adonis and Pollard, in *Capital* a classless middle of ordinary people is made possible because of a booming property market, rather than realisation of wealth because of aspiration and hard work.

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[220] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 7.
[221] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 3.
[222] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 7.
[223] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 6.

Capital also confirms the manifestation of the classless society through occasional representation of members of the underclass. This underclass is consistent with social accounts of 'chavs' coded as white, illiberal, and vulgar.[224] It is represented in the behaviour of football fans. As a coach carrying Freddy Kamo, Pepys Road's newest resident, and the rest of his team approaches a home game:

> people began to wave at it, honk their horns, brandish their team scarves, or – because this was a match day, which meant there were always plenty of opposing fans around – shout abuse, flick V-signs, call out player-specific insults (poof, black bastard, arse bandit, sheep-shagger, fat yid, paedo goatfucker, shit-eating towelhead, Catholic nonce, French poof, black French queer bastards, etc. etc.), and once, take down their trousers and moon the coach. [225]

Similiarly when Quentina conducts her patrols, she allows a man who claims to be unloading his car to evade a parking ticket. Moments later she is confronted by 'a woman in a tracksuit' with 'flushed indoor skin and crinkly, angry hair', who verbally abuses her:

> 'That's right,' she said, 'that's right. Let those snobs park anywhere they like. Ordinary people, you stick a ticket on them without looking twice, don't care if they're in the bay they belong in or not, stick a ticket on them, meet your quota, let them appeal if you're wrong, you don't care, yeah, just meet your

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[224] Jones, *Chavs.*

[225] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 312.

> quota, all it is, only got your job in the first place because of positive discrimination, ordinary working people pay the price, pay the fines, but get snobs in their big car and you let them do what they like. […] Why don't you just fuck off back to nig-nog land, go eat your fucking bananas in a tree and die of Aids, you nigger bastard? Eh? What the fuck are you doing here anyway?'[226]

These shocking and linguistically violent scenes feature only briefly before they shrink from view, but are a clear nod to febrile tensions and suggest the marginal presence of working-class characters in the novel; occasional working-class figures are accounted for in the notion of classlessness. This figure of an underclass captures the worst excesses of the caricature of working-class experience and seems to forecast a trifecta of an ordinary middle mass, a class of migrant workers, and an underclass.

The characters may seem disaggregated, straightforward caricatures of a cultural moment: a terrorist, the bigoted chav, the clueless investment banker, the equally loathed asylum seeker-cum-illegal worker-cum-traffic warden, a Polish builder, a footballer, and an anonymous hipster street artist. Indeed, Lanchester is concerned with representing the most familiar caricatures of contemporary life in

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[226] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 212.

'a long realist novel about contemporary London'.[227]

But *Capital* as an example of realism needs further consideration.

Nick Turner offers some observations that are useful when approaching Lanchester's novel. 'Realism', Turner writes,

> foregrounds character and environment, convention, verisimilitude and plausibility. I would also add the words linearity, causality and closure, and note that it is associated with tradition and the nineteenth century (which can be seen as a bad thing) and a commitment to society, politics and life and work in the lower classes (which has at times been seen to be good).[228]

The novel both privileges character and emphasises the centrality of Pepys Road to capture something – almost journalistic – about the state of the nation in the early twenty-first century, particularly in realist terms for how class and the notion of classlessness has been stressed. Moreover, Lanchester's belief that London provides a point of comparison between early twenty-first century and Victorian fiction may be found in two key places: first, inequality, since, as Lanchester writes, 'today's levels of inequality are

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[227] John Lanchester, 'John Lanchester on Capital – Guardian book club'.
[228] Nick Turner, 'Realism, Women Writers and the Contemporary British Novel', in *Realisms in Contemporary Culture: Theories, Politics and Medial Configurations*, ed. by Dorothee Birke and Stella Butter (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), pp. 49-69 (p. 53).

measurably similar to those of Victorian England'
and second, aspiration: 'just as in Victorian England,
London is where people now come to make their
fortunes. Where once it was Dick Whittington, now
it attracts Polish builders, plumbers and cleaners,
Czech nannies, French bond dealers and Russian
dentists'.[229] *Capital* relies on Victorian forms of
realism in order to reflect on the economic context of
contemporary Britain, as well as working-class
experience through migrant labour. *Capital* seems to
encapsulate the realist mode. But it is the notion of
realism that surfaces aesthetic and conceptual issues.
Capital represents the diversity of London, perhaps
suggests the totality of life in London, Britain, and
even the world in terms of class relations, and in this
way, Lanchester finds a means to portray the totality
of experience for various constitutive characters.
Pam Morris's definition of realism complicates such
a reading. For Morris, writers of realist fiction do 'not
aim at scientific or objective truth, and most
especially its goal is not any authoritative or singular
notion of truth'.[230] The attempt to capture a sense of
the totality of the state of things is a noble goal and a

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[229] John Lanchester, 'John Lanchester on Capital – Guardian book club'.
[230] Pam Morris, *Realism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), p. 93.

necessary one, a necessary one for literature seeking to capture the way things are, but the structuring principle on which *Capital* is built, complicates this picture of realism, and more, problematises characterisations of the novel as presenting a 'singular notion of truth.' On the one hand, *Capital* presents debased representations of caricatures from social life as figures in the text's landscape, a picture of contemporary London, class relations, and social relations, are presented as reductive. On the other hand, the novel is constituted of various characters, of diverse experiences, identities, and backgrounds, and contests nineteenth-century accounts of realism, the space of Pepys Road is only a geographical container of these populations rather than a culturally shared space of unification. Characters are marked by individuality, their status as economic actors, subjects within a network of other economic agents. To recognise individual status, rather than understanding them as set figures that constitute a community within a given space suggests Morris's argument that Lanchester's realism rejects 'a singular notion of truth.' In *Capital,* readers are privy to many truths, many subject positions, many experiences, many identities, which are, perhaps, emblematic of

the diverse cultural and class experiences of life in London, but complicate the notion of realism because a disaggregated cast constitutes the totality. *Capital* is, therefore, at once a novel of individual distinction and homogeneity.

The multi-perspectival narrative Lanchester employs in *Capital* provides a clear picture of what I am seeking to describe. A consequence of this aesthetic choice is the outsourcing of the narrative voice to an omniscient narrator, evoking again nineteenth-century realist modes, but this device produces specific effects, suggestive of the broader trajectories of what Shaw describes as 'Crunch Lit', which 'rejects the singular "I" in favour of plural, dialogic accounts'.[231] Such texts 'offer a plurality of fictional viewpoints on the financial crisis and, in doing so, create […] starting points from which new critical discussions can take place.'[232] It is difficult to dispute Shaw's claim that fiction confronting the financial collapse offers a starting point for new scholarship on the subject, and *Capital* offers a host of diverse fictional viewpoints. Yet, Shaw's suggestion that because of the plural form manifest in

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[231] Shaw, *Crunch Lit,* p. 14.
[232] Shaw, *Crunch Lit,* p. 14.

a multi-perspectival narrative, *Capital* necessarily places these characters in dialogue with each other must be rejected. It runs along the same lines as Jodi Dean's argument that the financial crisis facilitates communitarian desire (and for Dean, communist desire), that, after decades of individual self-interest, the rupture of the financial crisis provided an opportunity to reverse such value systems and reveal this behaviour as misguided, a revelation in which such figures will find themselves asking for penance.[233]

In *Capital*, self-interest is addressed from the outset. When Petunia collapses in the local corner shop, the proprietors emphasise community-focused impulses. 'Ahmed was a pompous dickhead', Lanchester notes, 'but Shahid had to admit, it was his brother's good side that he knew who the woman was and didn't treat her just as a nuisance to be cleared up as briskly as possible.'[234] Nevertheless, as Ahmed walks Petunia home, and she explains her fall, Ahmed 'could feel – he couldn't help himself – a wave of irritation he so often felt', and checks himself by remembering 'there was no point in doing a good

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[233] See Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, p. 6.
[234] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 48.

deed if all it made you do was feel bad-tempered.'[235]

Ahmed is seduced by the allure of potential profit as he surveys Petunia's house: 'The window had some old-fashioned coloured glass in it, an abstract circular pattern'.[236] The property is described as having notes of grandeur, implying the stained-glass of a Christian church, a feature that will add value to its market value. 'Ahmed – he couldn't help himself – wondered for a moment what the house was worth. If it was tatty on the inside but structurally sound, which would be his best guess, one and a half million.'[237] Offering to help Petunia into the house, he investigates the condition of the property further: 'His guess had been right', he assesses, 'There was clean but old carpet and ugly wallpaper with a flower pattern, and a telephone in the hallway. One million six.'[238] An acute awareness of local property prices rubs up against a communitarian ethic in a moral exchange, and the idea that Ahmed 'couldn't help himself' suggests he is incapable of stopping himself leering after his neighbour's property. Avarice motivates,

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[235] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 49.
[236] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 48.
[237] Lanchester, *Capital*, pp. 48-49.
[238] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 50.

and ultimately undermines, Pepys' Road's communitarian ethos.

As this scene suggests, this community is brought together by virtue of expanded wealth accumulation opportunities through a booming housing market. With the exception of Petunia, who indeed laments the disintegration of the British social contract and more problematically, the changing demographics of her community, the novel does present community dialogue, but when characters converse it is overwhelmingly for the purpose of exchange: Zbigniew performs work for Arabella; Kwame serves as the conduit for Quentina's employment; Mickey works as Freddy's agent. Neighbours exchanging salutations on the street are the best social interactions for which any of them can hope.

Capital proposes Pepys Road less as a community and more as a collection of consumers. More expansively, it is this figure – an individual actor within a nexus of others – that Hardt and Negri describe in their theorisation of the multitude, introduced in *Empire* (2000). Empire is, first, contrasted with imperialism, since Empire 'establishes no territorial center of power and does

not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers.'[239] By the twenty-first century, empire 'is a *decentred* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontier. In this way, it manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command.'[240] Initially, empire may seem difficult to map onto *Capital*, because Pepys Road lends itself to a reading where it represents the centre of power in the novel, but there is also scope to acknowledge this space as one in which 'hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies and plural exchanges' may be identified by readers. It is this that produces its subject: the multitude as contrasted with the people, the collective subject central to a mode of government; that is, familiar in the discourse and mechanisms of parliamentary democracy. 'The people is one', Hardt and Negri write.[241] Sovereignty, as outsourced to eligible voters in democratic processes, suggests a single body, not a set of individual subjects, a formation that seems wholly inadequate for contemporary politics, where

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[239] Michael Hardt and Antoni Negri, *Empire* (London: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. xii.

[240] Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. xii. Italics in the original.

[241] Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. 99.

the emphasis on individual self-expression and subject hood that has become important. 'The multitude', Hardt and Negri contend, is not unified but 'plural and multiple':

> The multitude is composed of a set of *singularities* – and by singularities here we mean a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different. The component parts of the people are indifferent in their unity; they become an identity by negating or setting aside their differences. The plural singularities of the multitude thus stand in contrast to the undifferentiated unity of the people.[242]

It is the emphasis on difference in the multitude that is important. Alternatively, in *Capital*, we see the emergence of an incipient subjectivity. Because there is a contradictory dynamic at work: the individual self-interest of consumers and property owners, as well as with the homogeneity of an amorphous middle prescribed by the classless society.

The novel concludes with the financial crisis – an event which it has been continuously anticipating – and intimates a change in view from the classless society. Roger does not see the crisis coming, nor his inevitable sacking: 'He had no preparation, no build-up, and he did not, not even in the faintest way, see it

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[242] Hardt and Negri, *Multitude,* p. 99.

coming.'[243] It is his inability to see what is going on around him that is one of the most noteworthy aspects of the financial crisis: the incapacity of workers in the financial sector, or politicians or economists in the main to recognise the coming crash. The novel captures this precisely. But Roger's plight, which sees him having to sell his house and leave Pepys Road, chanting 'I can change, I can change, I promise I can change change change', symbolises the extent to which property is bound up with the avarice of a consumer society. The financial crisis, the novel suggests, is a point in which subjects shift direction.[244] 'For some months now,' Lanchester recounts, Roger's 'deepest wish had been for Arabella to look in the mirror and realise that she had to change. […] But it hadn't happened. Arabella showed no sign of thinking that she couldn't go on like this.'[245] 'On the contrary, 'she showed every intention of going on as she was for ever. No plan b. It was labels, logos and conspicuous consumption all the way.'[246] Arabella's failure to change course goes against the trend in the genre of 'recessionista

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[243] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 465.
[244] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 577.
[245] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 575.
[246] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 575.

fiction', which as Katy Shaw notes, sees female characters for whom a

> pre-crunch lifestyle of cocktails and heels is eschewed in favour of financial practicality, as "shopaholic" heroines confront a harsh new reality, forced into a position where they must take stock of their lives and start again from the midst of financial ruin, divorce or a major career change.[247]

Against the idea advanced by recessionista fiction that places women as the leaders who re-think consumer culture and demand different ways of living and working after the crash, *Capital* instead intriguingly situates Roger in place of a recessionista. Roger appears to repeat this mantra in the hope that he will actually do it. Perhaps Roger will indeed end up as a yoga instructor, vegan, and teaching English with an NGO by 2010. But it seems more likely the novel puts Roger in this role to highlight the ultimate unlikeliness of this change.

As the street comes into view in the rear-view mirror of Roger's car as he leaves Pepys Road for the last time, the street's properties once again come into focus and symbolise a shift. In the prologue, consumer society has rendered the houses as consumers themselves: 'The houses were now like

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[247] Shaw, *Crunch Lit*, pp. 115-137.

people, and rich people at that, imperious, with needs of their own that they were not shy about having serviced'.[248] This is made evident in the flurry of packages from online sellers that flood the houses.[249] As the novel closes, however, a need for change, however small, is finally registered. Critically, this focuses on, perhaps, the most unsympathetic character: the investment banker who symbolises what is developing through a palpable of what the financial crisis has caused. If Pepys Road functions as a microcosm for Britain, and for the world in class terms, then the street functions, in specific terms, in the context of the financial crisis, as a metaphor in which classlessness is problematised. Observing how political and journalistic elites responded to the bursting of the housing bubble, David Harvey assesses in the U.S. context,

> It was only in mid-2007, when the foreclosure wave hit the white middle class in hitherto booming and significantly Republican urban and suburban areas in the US south (particularly Florida) and west (California, Arizona and Nevada), that officialdom started to take note and the mainstream press began to comment.'[250]

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[248] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 6.
[249] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 6.
[250] David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crises of Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2010), p. 1.

A financial and economic crisis that impacts both working- and middle-class Americans, the crash has a dreadful equalising effect on jobs and on the wealth some workers had amassed via the housing market. As Harvey shows, this seems to unravel. Roger's departure from Pepys Road and from the 'most expensive and most significant thing he had ever owned' symbolises how the consequences for a banker may be different from that of an ordinary worker.[251] Crucially, an account of what this devastating outcome for a working-class individual or family is not presented.

Instead, *Capital* clings to a narrative of cosmopolitan London but as the financial crisis arrives it can be re-read as representing the economic fallout around property. Quentina after all is not evicted from a property but rather the country, and her high education status has not guaranteed her status nor will it safeguard her from eviction. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government that was installed in May 2010 embarked upon a series of austerity policies, including the tripling of tuition fees, harsher sanctions for refugees, asylum seekers and a profound pursuit of austerity. Symbolised by

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[251] Lanchester, *Capital*, p. 576.

Quentina, this thesis will now examine these aspects in relation to an emergent and fragmented class of subjects that this thesis names as the precariat through four key texts, and turns to the figure of the millennial first to consider the emergence of one component of this class-in-the-making.

Chapter Two

<u>The Millennial and Horizontal Mobility in Paul</u>
<u>Ewen's *Francis Plug: How To Be A Public Author*</u>
<u>(2014)</u>

> In any real and living economy every actor is always an entrepreneur.
>
> Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action, a Treatise on Economics* (1949)

Ben Masters' novel *Noughties* (2012) supposedly exemplifies the typical experience of people who came of age in the early twenty-first century. The 'Noughties' generation were new adults in the closing years of the 2000s. Masters' charts the last night Eliot Lamb and his friends experience as undergraduate students at the University of Oxford. Over the course of the novel, Eliot conveys what it means to be young and in love, living away from home, and making new friends, enjoying the rewards of a university education, and the implicit economic, cultural and social capital that students at Oxford confer and seem destined to provide.

This narrative is familiar to many of Eliot's generation, and he is construed as a lower middle-class experience of aspiration. It is this experience,

however, that situates *Noughties* in a tradition of working-class writing. Evoking postwar working-class narratives of escape, where working-class children advance through grammar schools, *Noughties* captures the event of young adults fleeing home for the university campus, the first in their family to do so, and in the process reconstrues class aspirationalism for the early-twenty-first century. Evoking Alan Bates' escape from the council estate in *A Kind of Loving* or Renton fleeing Edinburgh for Amsterdam at the end of *Trainspotting*, *Noughties* recognises a particular social moment of working-class aspiration and situates this drive in the context of working-class writing. *Noughties* is a novel that acknowledges this tradition in Masters' commitment to twenty-first century notions of working-class masculinity. Eliot's poor treatment of his girlfriend and the inclusion of an abortion in the novel evokes the bastard pregnancies of postwar class fiction.[252] Further, the tight framework of the novel has the effect of focusing a single moment in time that contains the seeds of the future: Eliot's dreams and hallucinations of a baby that momentarily appears

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[252] See Alan Sillitoe, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1957; London: Harper Perennial, 2006); Shelagh Delaney, *A Taste of Honey* (1956; New York: Grove Press, 1994).

from nowhere but which he must care for represents his fear of adulthood, of conformity and of the responsibility that the role of parent confers. In these and other ways, *Noughties* borrows themes and scenes from postwar British class fiction, but it also invites consideration of how class issues are articulated in the novel form in the twenty-first century.

One such way class is articulated is in relation to a decadent hedonism, announced in the novel's three-part structure of 'Pub', 'Bar', 'Club' which signals the typical process of what might be a typical 'noughties' night out. The action takes place over a single night, with the inevitable shift from sobriety to inebriation, and Eliot ends the novel as he starts it: anxious about entering adulthood, being in a committed relationship to his girlfriend and scared of the prospect of having children. *Noughties* not only echoes working-class narratives that reject formality, structures, and social conservatism, but also implies the wasteful hedonism of the millennial generation. Its structure implies the failure of personal self-discovery; it is not a bildungsroman but rather conveys millennial experience as dialectically fixed,

temporally situated in the present, and characterised by indulgence.

This fixation on narcissistic, obsessively attached to social media, devoid of personal, professional, or economic development are some of the ways in which the millennial has been constructed in popular discourses.[253] She is also lazy, narcissistic, entitled, and politically disengaged.[254] She harbours radical leftist values, and is emotionally and psychologically fragile.[255] The millennial is understood as the generation that came of age at the millennium, with the consensus naming her as anyone born between 1981 and 1996, but little work on this figure has been conducted in the humanities, despite research over the last twenty years indicating generationality as a key locus for inequality.[256] This

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[253] Shawn M. Bergman, narcissism, and social networking: What narcissists do on social networking sites and why', *Personality and Individual Differences*, 50 (2011), 706-711 (p. 706); Jane Whitney Gibson, Regina A. Greenwood, and Edward F. Murphy Junior, 'Generational Differences in the Workplace: Personal Values Behaviours, and Popular Beliefs', *Journal of Diversity Management*, 4.3 (2009), 1-8.

[254] Ruth Milkman, 'Millennial Movements: Occupy Wall Street and the Dreamers', *Dissent*, 61.3 (2014), 55-59 (p. 55).

[255] Keir Milburn *Generation Left* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019); Craig Thorley, 'Flexibility For Who? Millennials and Mental Health in the Modern Labour Market', *Institute for Public Policy Research*, 2017, <https://www.ippr.org/files/2017-07/flexibility-for-who-report-july-2017.pdf> [accessed 13 April 2019].

[256] Accounts of the millennial's precise dates vary. Malcolm Harris locates this generation as born between 1980 and 2000, but I prefer the fifteen-year period, since this designates a specific experience of coming of age with the fast-paced

new cultural figure is the first to grow up with the internet to the workplace, university, and technology.[257] With devices and how she is affected by the cultural function of technology, increasingly central to daily life. The millennial embodies salient cultural differences from the generation preceding, a set of differences attributed to multiple technological enhancements emerging in the late twentieth century.[258]

The millennial as a contemporary manifestation of youth culture is a figure in the lineage of class fiction. Working-class writing has consistently placed youth culture at the centre of

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technologies that emerged in the late twentieth century. Neurological differences between Generation Z and Millennials have been detected and for the sake of precision, I follow the dominant view in the social sciences. See Malcolm Harris, *Kids These Days: Human Capital and the Making of Millennials* (London: Little Brown, 2017), p. 4; Pakulski and Walters, *The Death of Class*, p. 64. See Arthur Asa Berger, *Cultural Perspectives on Millennials* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

[257] See Andrea Hershatter and Molly Epstein, 'Millennials and the World of Work: An Organisation and Management Perspective', *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 25.2 (2010), 211-223; Karen K. Myers and Kamyab Sadaghiani 'Millennials in the Workplace: A Communication Perspective on Millennials' Organizational Relationships and Performance', *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 25.2 (2010), 225-238; Claire Raines, *Connecting Generations: The Sourcebook for a New Workplace* (Berkley, CA: Crisp, 2003); Michael D. Coombes and Robert DeBard (eds), Serving the Millennial Generation, *New Directions for Students Services*, 206 (2004); Jackie L. Hartman and Jim McCambridge, 'Optimizing Millennials' Communication Styles', *Business Communication Quarterly*, 74.1 (2011), 22-44.

[258] In addition, this figure is often conceptualised in relation to culture in the United States and is used much more readily in common parlance there than in Britain. In this chapter, I use 'millennial' to refer to both the generation and a cultural figure.

narratives of poverty, aspiration, and anti-establishment feeling, from Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* (1933), Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim* (1954), Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), John Braine's *A Room at the Top* (1957), Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1958), Nell Dunn's *Poor Cow* (1967) to Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993), Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), and Nicola Monaghan's *The Killing Jar* (2006). Youth culture, and what it means to be young – the need to find employment, the clash of social and cultural difference, access to free time and spare cash, assembling and disassembling family life, illicit sexual and bodily practices – have become central in constructing key working-class tropes. The factory girl and the angry young man provide such examples in postwar class fiction and have evolved into 'chav' or 'underclass' types, as well as the millennial.[259]

Despite establishing tropes of representations for youth culture and experience in class fiction historically, literary studies has paid relatively little attention to this generational dynamic. Connell's

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[259] Stephanie Lawler, 'Heroic workers and angry young men: Nostalgic stories of class in England', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 17.6 (2014), 701-720.

interrogation of Canadian writer Douglas Coupland's inter-generational trilogy, *Generation X*, *Microserfs*, and *JPod*, is one example that illustrates the international presence of these dynamics. Coupland's trilogy exemplifies the contemporary work-economy.[260] In Connell's reading is an ostensible contradiction of generational tensions: 'despite the apparent claims of [sic] rupture between the present generation and earlier generations, especially of Baby-Boomers and Yuppies as the beneficiaries of post-War Keynesianism,' Connell writes, 'the temporality of the present in these three novels is a mobile category.'[261] When read in conjunction, a key dynamic in contemporary generational politics begins to emerge. Focusing on a group of characters in their late 20s, Coupland represents contemporary experience, and then the later novel *JPod* regards the generation represented in *Generation X*, who by the mid-2000s are well into their 40s and represent an older generation towards which characters in *JPod* feel resentful. Because they feel exploited as programmers for a computer-game manufacturer and

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[260] Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991; London: Abacus, 2004); Douglas Coupland, *Microserfs* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996); Douglas Coupland, *JPod* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).
[261] Connell, *Precarious Labour and the Contemporary Novel*, p. 15.

harbour a resentment of the preceding generation who are perceived to have benefited from the injection of venture capital into the tech industry during the dot.com boom, with hindsight, they see the characters of *Microserfs* as privileged but characters in *Microserfs* recognise themselves as equally victimised by a system of exploitation, as do the programmers of *JPod*.[262]

Coupland's trilogy intimates a tendency that can be identified as generational tensions between Millennials and Baby Boomers. But inter-generational solidarities may also be identified between Millennials and Generation Z, the generation that succeeds millennials. These generations are discursively homogenized as millennials in popular culture because they are confronted with the same set of economic conditions when entering the labour market, finding career prospects and opportunities for career-building, increasingly limited, and discovering responsibility for personal and professional expansion is privatised to the self. Connell suggests that 'awareness of a cohesive generationality depends upon a narrative of

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[262] Connell, *Precarious Labour and the Contemporary Novel*, p. 16.

belatedness that is partly mythic and not objectively grounded in facts.'[263] Connell's observation suggests how the relationship between individuality and technology – as well as social and cultural systems more broadly – will alter within and between generations. But, it is also important to note that categorisation is unreliable – as claims to class experience always are – constructed by personal narratives, public discourse that are taken to construct subjects as social.

Inter-generational tension is not unique to a particular moment or to Baby Boomers and Millennials but what is distinctive is that the millennial generation is the first to grow up under neoliberalism.[264] Michael Harris observes the effect this condition has on the millennial. 'Over the past forty years,' he argues,

> we have witnessed an accelerated and historically unprecedented pace of change as capitalism emerged as the single dominant mode of organizing society. […] [Capitalism]'s desperate to find anything that hasn't yet been reengineered to maximise profit, and then it makes those changes as

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[263] Connell, *Precarious Labour and the Contemporary Novel*, p. 16.

[264] Emily A. Vogels, 'Millennials stand out for their technology use, but older generations also embrace digital life', *Pew Research Centre*, 9 September 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/09/us-generations-technology-use/? [accessed 11 September 2019]; Harris, *Kids These Days*, p. 4.

> quickly as possible. The rate of exchange is visibly unsustainable. The profiteers call this process 'disruption,' while commentators on the left generally call it 'neoliberalism' or 'late capitalism'. Millennials know it better as the 'world', or 'America', or 'Everything'.[265]

Harris's polemical style may distract from the most important point he makes here that millennials are situated outside of a capitalist-anti-capitalist dichotomy and are instead caught between these two ideological viewpoints – as victim, even, of this struggle. Harris codes the figure of the millennial in a language of oppression but designates the normativity of neoliberalism and the economic, political, and social actuality that this condition fosters – economic precarity, self-interest, self-sufficiency – as naturalised, leaving the millennial unable to imagine alternative ways of structuring life or living it.

It is the political context, then, that constructs millennials as a class. Generational theory argues that subjecthood is formed by the events as a generation comes of age. For example, Maria Teresa Grasso et al. argue that 'it is not so much affluence and security in childhood that shapes the values and political commitments of new cohorts, but rather the political

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[265] Harris, *Kids These Days*, pp. 4-5.

experiences and historical events occurring during one's young adulthood.'[266] Constituents of a generation may be divided by categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, or combinations, but the values and conceptions of the world, temporal and spatial factors, may provide a better lens through which to understand the ways in which generational politics are shaped.[267] Temporal and spatial factors in a generation's economic, social, cultural environment lead Karl Mannheim to compare generations to social classes because they emerge out of distinct socio-cultural and economic contexts.[268] Rather than an individualised narrative of poverty, for example, that is centred on the family or on growing up poor or in a certain community, Mannheim equates generations with nations.

This idea of the nation as a social class may seem familiar in the British context from studies such as Tom Nairn's *The Break-Up of Britain* (1981)

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[266] Maria Teresa Grasso, Stephen Farrell, Emily Gray, Colin Gay and Will Jennings, 'Thatcher's Children, Blair's Babies, Political Socialization and Trickle-down Value Change: An Age, Period and Cohort Analysis', *British Journal of Political Science*, 49.1 (2019), pp. 17-36 (p. 19).

[267] Grasso et al., 'Thatcher's Children, Blair's Babies, Political Socialization and Trickle-down Value Change', p. 19.

[268] Karl Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations', in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (1928; London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 276-230.

though to studies with more of an international focus such as John Smith's *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century*.[269] But this view requires a different perspective. Political events prove formative as respective generations become socially and politically conscious, according to this argument. For the Baby Boomer generation, for example, subject formation may be located in the labour militancy of the 1970s, the three-day working week, the bailout in Britain by the International Monetary Fund in 1976 and the 'Winter of Discontent'. For members of Generation X, this subject formation might be Thatcher's election and the Miner's Strike, and of course, those markers overlap for Baby Boomers. For Millennials, events such as the attacks on the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001, the dotcom bubble-burst shortly after, and the collapse of global financial markets in 2008 might be equally significant. In my view, for millennials, the cultural and economic events of the financial crisis and 9/11 are particularly formative, and frame the conceptual concerns of this thesis. The financial crisis is a vital moment for millennials' subject formation in Britain,

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[269] Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1981), pp. 24-37; Smith, *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century*, pp. 101-103.

incorporating student protests against university fees in 2010, the Occupy movement in 2012, and the various anti-austerity protests against issues that impacted millennials disproportionately in the early 2010s.[270]

Anne Helen Petersen suggests that the dotcom bubble is significant for the unravelling of late twentieth-century discourses of aspiration, but it is the financial crisis, and the subsequent shift in economic policy in Britain, that is *the* primary and formative political event for the millennial generation.[271] It is implied in Masters' *The Noughties* but features as a spectral presence in Paul Ewen's *Francis Plug: How To Be A Public Author*. Francis Plug, as the millennial at the centre of Ewen's novel evokes the 'greedy banker' as the primary villain of the early twenty-first century. This is made manifest in Plug's working relationship with an investment banker, Mr Stapleton. 'Mr Stapleton is a banker', Ewen observes, 'but he doesn't look like one':

> He's part of the new 'rock star' breed. Unlike his predecessors, he's not geeky and awkward. In fact, he looks more Baywatch than

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[270] See Milburn, *Generation Left*.

[271] Anne Helen Petersen, 'How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation', *Buzzfeed News*, 5 January 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/millennials-burnout-generation-debt-work> [accessed 27 April 2019].

> MoneyWatch. He's a tall fellow, broad and white, with tanned skin, most likely achieved via ultra-violet bulbs. A 'home counties' background, in his late 30's [sic], with pale eyes, light brown hair (darkened with gel or 'fudge'), and a thin unfurling nose, scarred at the bridge, as if broken and swiftly fixed. Handsome yes, but in a dastardly, villainous way.[272]

To some extent, Mr Stapleton still encapsulates the formality and prestige of the profession as it was in the nineteenth century, though Plug's insistence on using the honorific 'Mr' to address him, even in person, he embodied as the image, cultivated in popular culture, of the banker under neoliberalism: handsome, confident, rich, and the embodiment of masculinity.[273] Mr Stapleton is also coded as having enjoyed the benefits of class privilege. Insofar as his quintessentially English accent suggests a background of extreme privilege but it is not suggested that this privilege has been earned or that social mobility has allowed Stapleton to attain his position.

Mr Stapleton serves as a metonym for the ruling class and the vast wealth this group owns. 'Mr Stapleton has loads of money, gazillions, but he's at

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[272] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 24.
[273] Leonardo Di Caprio's portrayal of Jordan Belfort in *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) or Ryan Gosling's characterisation of Jared Bennett in *The Big Short* (2015).

pains to share as little of it with me as possible', Plug says, adding resentfully, 'My hard earned taxes are bailing out his lot and paying for their fancy haircuts'.[274] Marked by a comic irreverence, Plug presents bankers as the architects of the financial crisis, and the handmaid's who benefit the most from it. Plug also points to a wider dissatisfaction with the rich and with the concentration of economic resources in the hands of a small class of people. But this sentiment is individualised: Plug wants Mr Stapleton to share the money with him alone and not as part of a policy for the redistribution of wealth.

This inter-personal relationship is Ewen's means to individualise the experience of the crisis. It plays out between Mr Stapleton and Plug, but Ewen also offers a sustained critique of the structural ubiquity of the financial sector in cultural life. The novel follows Plug as he pursues his creative interests while undertaking gardening work for Mr Stapleton. Most significantly, Plug is attempting to write a book on literary prize culture. His ambition is to win the Booker Prize and he offers this book – the book we are reading – as a text he believes could win. Ewen

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[274] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 128.

logs Plug's visits to thirty-three different literary events where a Booker Prize-winning author is present. As the novel draws to a close, Plug concludes that there is a lack of distinction between the elite economic and cultural power that resides in the Booker Prize itself. 'The buildings of the City loom large across the Thames to the west, comprised mainly of financial institutions' Plug observes, 'Somewhere amidst those towers to money is the Guildhall, where the Booker Prize-winners are announced. What a strange place for a literary award. In the middle of the banks.'[275] Given Plug's sustained criticism of finance, bankers, and their role in causing the financial crisis, this spatial proximity is not strange at all. Rather, it consolidates his previous observations by honing in on the brazen intimacy of cultural production and financial dominance.

At one of Britain's most prestigious literary events, the Hay Festival, Plug observes the power that financial capital commands over elite literary culture: 'The new venue is a tent sponsored by a major financial institution, a contributor to the recent banking crisis', he decides, 'I find this a bit off,

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[275] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 256.

understandably, but it's not like I have a choice. […] It's a big nasty bank tent or nothing.'[276] The role played by neoliberalism in fostering vibrant literary cultures has been well documented. Joseph Brooker among others has traced how, since the 1980s, literary awards, festivals, and other spectacles attached to the 'economy of prestige', have helped to secure recognition for literary fiction.[277] Indeed, the Booker Prize's dominant influence over literary culture has been revitalizing and 'is usually held to have breathed lifeblood back into British literary culture.'[278] Neoliberalism's influence on literary culture and the prize would be difficult to dispute as a general claim, but Plug is keen to communicate a disempowered and dissatisfied sentiment about the control of the banking industry on the maintenance of literary events and literary production. He emphasises the ubiquity of the financial sector's dominance at Hay. 'I hide behind a newspaper produced by the chief festival sponsor,' he recounts; 'One of its headlines reads: BANKERS PAID £14

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[276] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 182.

[277] Brooker, *Literature of the 1980s*, pp. 31-33; see also James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[278] Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond* (Chichester: Wiley, 2008), p. 54.

BILLION IN BONUSES.'[279] Filled with anger, he rips the front page from the newspaper and tears it into small pieces, a small act of dissent. Here, Ewen emphasises the larger scale and power of finance capital, even in the wake of 2008, and the powerlessness of workers. Plug's quiet protest draws some attention from other attendees, but it is a scene designed to evoke the reader's pity.

How To Be A Public Author exposes and explores a sense of anger over neoliberal finance capital. On May Day, Plug heads off to join a protest, reminiscent of the Occupy Wall Street protests. 'I head towards the City with my eggs, looking for riots'.[280] But everywhere around him, life carries on as normal: 'The crowds on Oxford Street aren't angry. They're swinging shopping bags and buying things they don't need on May Day.'[281] Consumer culture is not interrupted by what Plug hopes will be a day of revolutionary action, and he mistakenly joins a pub walk around key literary locations in Bloomsbury, believing it is a May Day protest. Plug continually seeks out opportunities to initiate the

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[279] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 191.
[280] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 168.
[281] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 186.

rebellion of which he believes he is a part. After 'Northern Woman', a participant in the literary walk, tells him they have reached the house in which Oscar Wilde spent his last evening in England, Plug asks 'Did you bring any weapons?'[282] The group soon tires of his militancy; 'Leave us alone!' the tour guide shouts at him, to which he responds 'thanks for nothing. You bunch of frauds'.[283] The effect on the reader is, like many other scenes in the novel, one of amusement, but satire infuses the politics attached to each situation: consumerism is unaffected and upheld, and anger and resistance is embodied only in Plug and the tour into which he stumbles is only concerned with high literary culture. The novel nods to generational tensions with millennials constructed as radical political subjects, even if Plug fails to act tangibly.

This novel seems to confirm the millennial as a figure of left-wing economic and anti-establishment values. Keir Milburn's contention is that this generation and the one that succeeds will be characterised by a left politics. 'Something remarkable has happened over the last few years',

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[282] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 171.
[283] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 172.

Milburn observes. 'Age has emerged as the key dividing line in politics. Young people are much more likely to vote Left and hold left-wing views.'[284] Milburn also contends that older generations are more likely to vote for right-wing parties and have socially and politically conservative views.[285] Opposing this simplification, Grasso et al. argue that millennials harbour more right-wing and authoritarian values than the generations that preceded it.[286] This argument maybe surprising, given how much cultural commentary claims millennials are responsible for a leftist insurgence but although there is evidence to suggest a reverse in conservative attitudes around social values, millennials support conservative economic conservative principles: 'over a period of twenty or more years, the electorate indeed became more Thatcherite, particularly with respect to negative attitudes about the benefits system, the unemployed, benefit recipients and the welfare system more generally'.[287] This generation, however, supported

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[284] Milburn, *Generation Left*, p. 1.

[285] Milburn, *Generation Left*, p. 1.

[286] Grasso et al, 'Thatcher's Children, Blair's Babies, Political Socialization and Trickle-down Value Change', p. 32.

[287] Grasso et al., 'Thatcher's Children, Blair's Babies, Political Socialization and Trickle-down Value Change', p. 30.

the Labour Party in large numbers, following a leftward shift in its policy platform following the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader. In 'Geographies of Brexit and its aftermath', an assessment of voting patterns in 2016 and 2017, Johnston et al assert that 'Labour's substantial increase was largely due to its anti-austerity policies both re-mobilising support among formerly disenchanted supporters in its traditional heartlands, where turnout was relatively high […] and encouraging greater support than at many previous elections among young voters'.[288] 'Young voters' is a vague term and may not, given that millennials now constitute people in their mid-20s to late 30s, accurately reflect 'millennial'. Sarah Pickard shows that a significant increase in support for the Labour Party in the under-45 demographic and a twenty-point increase in support for the Labour Party among 18-34 year olds and a fourteen-point increase in support for the 35-44 age bracket.[289] An increase in support may not, of course, confirm a leftist trajectory but may indicate individual self-

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[288] Ron Johnston, David Manley, Charles Pattie and Kelvyn Jones, 'Geographies of Brexit and its aftermath: voting in England at the 2016 referendum and the 2017 general election', *Space and Polity*, 22.2 (2018), 162-187 (pp. 179-180).
[289] Sarah Pickard, *Politics, Protest, and Young People: Political Participation and Dissent in 21st Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 331.

interest. As Ewen implies, Plug's frustration is not necessarily with capitalism *per se*, but rather with the concentration of power in the hands of an economic and cultural elite, from which he is excluded. Rather than campaigning for this elite to be abolished, Plug would like to be part of this elite. This tension between structural exclusion, macroeconomic failure, and individual self-interest is embodied in Plug.

Self-interest is of central importance in understanding the figure of the millennial. In Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval's analysis of 'entrepreneurial man', the discussion revolves around ordoliberalist thinkers Ludwig von Mises, Lionel Robbins, and Freidrich Hayek.[290] *The Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society* (2016) explores von Mises' analysis of the binary distinction between consumer democracy and state totalitarianism – that is, between a form of government predicated on consumerism and socialist-communist modes of

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[290] Ordoliberalism is largely associated with German economic thinkers from the late 1920s and thinkers attached to the philosophy such as Walter Eucken and Franz Böhm rejected neoliberalism, despite the shared goal of economic liberty. However, ordoliberalism is distinct from neoliberalism since it is premised on the idea that a strong state is central to the delivery of liberal governance. See Werner Bonfeld, 'Freedom and the Strong State: On German Ordoliberalism', *New Political Economy*, 17.5 (2012), 633-656. See also William Davies, 'A bibliographic Review of Neoliberalism'.

governance. It raises the central premise of the subject under neoliberalism as self-interest: 'There can be no market economy without the absolute primacy of self-interest to the exclusion of any other motive for action'.[291] On the one hand, this view establishes human actors under neoliberalism in terms of their own interests. If Grasso et al's conclusions are accurate, we may arrive at a compelling account of millennials' overwhelming support for the Labour Party, and its quasi-socialist programme of economic reform, if support for this party and its project is motivated by a desire to initiate and establish an infrastructure that will enable the achievement of the right-wing dream of social mobility – home ownership, for example, and good-paying jobs. But the millennial's self-interest, rather than communitarian desire for social justice and for economic and social transformation into a post-capitalist phase of government is a key factor, too. That is why Dardot and Laval express a need to interrogate the way in which the market economy produces the figure of the millennial as an economic actor who understands her identity in relation to the

[291] Pierre Dardot and Christian Naval, *The Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, trans. by Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2016), p. 108.

market economy, who models herself on the market in which entrepreneurialism takes a central role.

Foucault's cultural mapping is helpful in understanding the millennial as part of a formation emerging after neoliberalism, as well as in specific relation to his representation as Francis Plug in Ewen's novel. In the *College de France* lectures (1978-1979), Foucault introduces the concept of neoliberalism for the first time, developing the arguments he made in the previous year's lectures, he focuses on the genealogy of the art of government and charts four stages of neoliberalism's development through eighteenth-century English liberalism, twentieth-century German ordoliberalism, 1970s French Giscardian neoliberalism, and American Chicago School neoliberalism. For Foucault, the 'spontaneous mechanisms of the economy' are implicit mechanisms upon which all and any government agrees and they structure liberalism and the liberal art of government.[292] These principles are not to be implemented in any juridical system to guarantee the basic rights of individuals, Foucault argues.[293]

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[292] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, p. 61.
[293] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics,* pp. 61-2.

Rather, he contends that government conducts 'politics with a precise, continuous, clear and distinct knowledge of what is taking place in society, in the market, and in the economic circuits' and that 'the limitation of its power is not given by respect for the freedom of individuals, but simply by the evidence of economic analysis which it knows has to be respected.'[294] Under liberalism, economic principles structure the art of government, the ways in which judicial processes are enacted, how trade functions, and so on.

Under neoliberalism, however, the role of government is recalibrated in a shift from the principles laid down by liberal economists. This neoliberal art of government shifts from a society structured on the economic mode of exchange to one predicated on the principle of enterprise. This seeks to realise 'a society that is not orientated towards the commodity and the uniformity of the commodity, but towards the multiplicity and differentiation of enterprises.'[295] This idea may seem contradictory in a period where consumerism and the consumer are the focal point of capitalism but government

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[294] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics,* pp. 61-2.
[295] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, p. 149.

predicated on the principle of enterprise produces new subjectivities. As Foucault proposes, the figure central to liberalism, *homo oeconomicus*, is the agent of capital and commodity exchange and (re)emerges here as the embodied agent of entrepreneurism. '*Homo oeconomicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself', Foucault writes, '*homo oeconomicus* as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings.'[296] *Homo oeconomicus* is the figure *par excellence* of neoliberalism, having internalized the art of government into its subjectivity. Today, this figure appears in the various social and cultural networks of contemporary capitalism. We can identify her, for instance, in the self-employed hairdresser, who hires a chair in a salon or travels to clients' houses to carry out her work, where she mobilises human capital to persuade customers to continue to buy her service; rather than rely on the salon and its owner for work, her opportunities for earning increase or decrease dependent upon herself alone. She is also located in the Influencer, who effectively mobilises her cultural capital and social

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[296] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, p. 226.

networks to construct a social identity on Twitter or Instagram, or the YouTuber, who taps into ever-emerging markets to provide make-up tutorials or act as an alternative source to mainstream media outlets for information. She may even be found in the food blogger, in figures such as Jack Monroe, whose recipe books for people on a budget propelled them to fame, or Joe Wicks who received attention for online fitness videos and now enjoys national celebrity. Such figures rise to fame because of new technologies and their ability to draw on their human capital and initiative. We may also consider consultants who offer advice to businesses, mobilising their expertise. The product – it does not matter what it is – can be an ASMR video, a far-right YouTube show, or a service for exchange such as a haircut. Most important is the primacy that neoliberalism attaches to the self, the individual as the source of her own earnings, herself as producer, herself as her own capital, *homo oeconomicus* as an entrepreneur of self. The product is herself; she puts herself on the market. It is for this reason that Philip

Mirowski avers that 'participation in neoliberal life necessitates acting as an entrepreneur of the self'.[297]

As Foucault indicates, the shift from liberalism as a form of capitalism based on economic exchange, to neoliberalism where exchange is supplanted by competition, is significant in my context. When Wendy Brown charts this development, she argues that it renders all market actors 'little capitalists' rather than as 'owners, workers, and consumers.'[298] The primary drive of these actors is to compete with one another, rather than navigate the outmoded liberal aim of commodity exchange. The result is a reconfiguration of the human as an odd and mangled version of the capitalist, figured in the individual: 'Human capital's constant and ubiquitous aim, whether studying, interning, working, planning retirement or reinventing itself in a new life,' Brown writes,

> is to entrepreneurialize its endeavors, appreciate its value, and increase its rating or ranking. In this, it mirrors the mandate for contemporary firms, countries, academic departments or journals, universities, media or websites: entrepreneurialize, enhance

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[297] Philip Mirowski *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go To Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 119.

[298] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 36.

competitive positioning and value, maximize ratings or rankings.[299]

Workers are recast as subjects whose drive is not solely to produce profit, but to produce themselves. They must obtain new skills as the market demands; the self must be remade as capitalism adapts. Conceived by neoliberalism's genetic constitutive element to shift and re-make itself, this subject must always strive to make and re-make herself, situate herself against others in the market, and marketize herself.

Critically, as Brown discerns, in neoliberalism 'fields, persons, and practices are economized in ways that vastly exceed literal wealth generation'.[300] Profit is not the aim: the aim is the enhancement of the self. This figure does not, therefore, need to exist in terms of capitalist production, and it is why Dardot and Laval claim 'the entrepreneur is not a capitalist.'[301] The drive from which this figure comes is individualised competition. The ethos of the corporate body is located in the individual. This figure operates in excessive ways to enhance her value and increase her

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[299] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 36.
[300] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, pp. 36-37.
[301] Dardot & Laval, *The New Way of the World*, p. 111.

approval, especially through social media 'likes' and "retweets,' which Brown describes as 'rankings and ratings for every activity and domain'.[302] This figure is recognisable on social media platforms: in response to comments a public figure makes, she must denounce or approve; taking to Twitter; she must position and promote her own moral righteousness. Although well intentioned, these actions and statements are fundamentally an expression of this figure as *homo oeconomicus*, as embodying human capital. Such positioning is essential. Without it, the actor maybe thrown out of favour, denounced, de-platformed or 'cancelled': her own livelihood depends upon maintaining a profile. Plug's failure to act out this particular requirement of the socially networked subject - he never tweets, live streams, or engages whatsoever with online audiences - is another reason his success is ultimately doomed. To the contrary, Plug believes this newfound responsibility of the author is a waste of time. Writers are now

> encouraged to "connect" with their audience and "make friends" on social networking website and the like. Maybe some authors are comfortable making "cyber friends". But I'd

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[302] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 34. See also Michel Feher, 'Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital', *Public Culture*, 21.1 (2009), 21-41.

rather spend my spare time writing a book than writing about what I had for lunch.'[303]

Such competition, as it is embodied in *homo oeconomicus*, constitutes a new experience for subjects under neoliberal capitalism. As the source of her own profit and to enhance her human capital, a hyper-competition results in an intense need to produce high amounts of work. This drive to produce profit and enhanced human capital yields deleterious effects. Such effects include poor mental health, an inability to concentrate, and a failure to complete certain tasks. Helen Anne Petersen describes this condition, in terms of the generation of millennials, as 'burnout'. 'Why am I burned out?', she writes, 'Because I've internalized the idea that I should be working all the time. Why have I internalized that idea? Because everything and everyone in my life has reinforced it – explicitly and implicitly – since I was young.'[304] Petersen describes specific tasks – such as paying bills or finding time to do domestic labour – as debilitating; often, they are postponed. This condition, she argues, is 'errand paralysis', whereby every day and mundane tasks are simply not

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[303] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 21.

[304] Helen Anne Petersen, 'How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation'.

completed; failure to complete such chores is positioned in stark contrast to success in professional life. She writes:

> I was publishing stories, writing two books, making meals, executing a move across the country, planning trips, paying my student loans, exercising on a regular basis. But when it came to the mundane, the medium priority, the stuff that wouldn't make my job easier or my work better, I avoided it.[305]

Labour becomes the focal point under this arrangement of neoliberalism. Domestic and social life may be shelved, optimising the self to achieve personal success is primary under this relation. The amorphous workday and weekday for some millennials takes an incredible toll, she infers, where work becomes an infinite series of tasks.

Millennials, embodying neoliberalism's *homo oeconomicus* as human capital are caught and held by this rationality. Under neoliberalism, it produces certain (personal) failures, including an inability to manage basic requirements for life, by ensuring basic needs such as providing healthy food, maintaining shelter, and managing healthy relationships are met. Plug encapsulates this millennial experience. In all its facets, Mr Stapleton is Plug's 'client' not his

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[305] Petersen, 'How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation'.

employer and this status change from worker to entrepreneur of the self is implicit in how their business relationship is introduced in the novel: 'I came recommended by the Hargreaves, an elderly couple whose garden I tend in Highgate. According to them, Mr Stapleton was taken by the fact that I was a writer.'[306] Plug does not apply for the post, nor is there an official recruitment process for it. Rather, Plug is commissioned because of his experience as a gardener and also because of his personal and cultural portfolio. Plug freelances as a gardener for Mr Stapleton, a role for which he is demonstrably unqualified. His dream is to become a published author and win the foremost literary award in Britain, but as *homo oeconomicus*, Plug identifies a key problem facing millennials: 'there lies the problem for the author of today,' Plug explains, 'too many other concerns prevent you from actually writing. Things like money, working to earn the money […]. When you could be writing.'[307] Recognising the need to balance paid labour with his creative desire, Plug confirms a difficulty of the millennial condition that is bound up in negotiating the desires of *homo*

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[306] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 23, p. 25.
[307] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 25.

oeconomicus and the pursuit of projects with the demands of meeting the material needs.

Plug also conveys a sense of millennial burnout. 'I ended up sitting in the rafters of Mr Stapleton's oak tree for two and a half hours,' Plug admits, 'I had my smokes, and also a cheeky little bottle of Scotch.'[308] Seeming to confirm a caricature of millennials as workshy or lazy, Ewen conveys this experience of intense enjoyment as undesirable. Plug acknowledges tension between him and Mr Stapleton and an explanation for that souring relationship can be found in their different approaches to life. 'He's a hard-edged investment type, a mover and a shaker', Plug explains, 'Whereas me, I'm more of a meek, bleeding heart, lacking any of that ruthless drive stuff, or capitalist fervour. We may as well be from different planets. It amazes me that I've lasted this long as his groundsman.'[309] Separating himself from a rapacious capitalist subjectivity, Plug's problem with Mr Stapleton is implied as an issue of work ethic, personality type, embodied and fixed characteristics used as justifications for success or failure. Yet, read as *homo oeconomicus*, Plug is only

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[308] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 25.
[309] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, pp. 24-25.

distinct from Mr Stapleton because of the focus of their drive: Plug is committed to literary excellence and intellectual enterprise; Mr Stapleton to making profit. Here, Ewen exposes a clash between two different subjects of contemporary capitalism: the entrepreneur of the self and the subject keen to make profit. On the face of it, Plug's indolence suggests an absent work ethic, but his behaviour may also suggest Petersen's concept of 'errand paralysis'. As we have seen, Plug identifies myriad tasks he has set himself to complete. As *homo oeconomicus*, he performs roles to further his potential for profit, but this work is overwhelming and he cannot complete the tasks to which he is bound. Leisure and burnout collapse together in this scene.

Ewen shows how ineffective Plug is at managing these demands. In the novel's characteristically comic style, Plug calls in sick to his boss Mr Bevill for work unapologetically, not to take the day off, but to further his career potential:

> **FP:** I can't come over today, I'm afraid. 'Cos I'm sick. I'm curled up in bed.
> **Mr Bevill:** Oh dear. Well I hope…
> **FP:** Look, I'm about to go into a tunnel so I might cut out… [*Beep, beep, beep.*]
>
> I can't really afford to skive off work at the moment, but A.S. Byatt is doing a midday event at Foyles bookshop. And before that I

want to visit the London Library's Reading Room.[310]

Plug's pursuit of an alternative professional life trumps the need to provide for his material wellbeing, which is constituted as a set of boring tasks. In this way, millennials' behaviour reflects a rapacious capitalist desire, but as self-interest. In this sense, the o millennial is motivated by personal self-interest, understood in terms of a pathologized status, and consistent with the emergence of *homo oeconomicus*.

After he returns home from the Hay Festival, Plug confides the more sinister consequences of his inability to manage the various responsibilities:

> It's nice to be home again, although not that nice because my bed's gone, along with all my household appliances, my gardening tools, and also my van. They've been seized in order to cover my unpaid bills. With my work stuff gone, that's effectively my livelihood scuppered, which means I have no way of earning money to pay back the bank or the other demanding bodies. There is also an eviction notice, with immediate effect. But they've left the bedding behind, so I stand in the middle of my tiny flat, pillow fighting myself.[311]

This moment confirms the limits of the neoliberal ideal of pursuing individual dreams because without material guarantees around housing and income, such an ideal is available only to those only with the means

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[310] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 41.
[311] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 211.

to support ambitions. The novel suggests social mobility is impossible.

As Plug's material security slips away, his circumstances, condition, and behaviour may be read as experiencing a mental health crisis. In so far as schizophrenia has been understood as the condition that marks capitalism with its boom-and-bust cycles reflecting the manic state characteristic of bi-polar disorder. Capitalism 'periodically lurch[es] between hyped-up mania … and depressive come-down', Mark Fisher argued, determining that 'The term "economic depression" is no accident …. To a degree unprecedented in any other social system, capitalism both feeds on and reproduces the moods of populations. Without delirium and confidence, capital could not function.'[312] It is unsurprising that a system that produces classes based on its functioning transplants the depressive tendencies that constitute its being onto the relations capitalism produces. For Fisher, this manifests in several ways under neoliberalism. First, he observes the increased rates of mental health problems in young people and the tendency for various conditions to appear at

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[312] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 35.

increasingly younger ages. Confirming mental health issues as a class issue, Fisher claims 'being a teenager in late capitalist Britain is now close to being reclassified as a sickness.'[313] Any condition is treated as a psycho-physiological imbalance; attaching the cause and the responsibility for cure or the maintenance of the condition to the individual or family leads Fisher to describe the circumstances under neoliberalism as the 'privatisation of stress.'[314]

A schizophrenic condition of capitalism embodied in neoliberalism comprises two significant effects. On the one hand, capitalism breaks down linear labour – understood as 'rigidity' and associated with Fordism – and opts for 'flexibility', the primary condition of neoliberalism or 'supply side economics'. Flexibility, Fisher argues, is characterised by 'deregulation of capital and labor, with the workforce being casualized (with an increasing number of workers employed on a temporary basis), and outsourced.'[315] The effect of this transition to a flexible (or distributed) economy is that 'Work and life become inseparable. Capital

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[313] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 21.
[314] Mark Fisher, 'The Privatisation of Stress', *Soundings*, 48 (2011), 123-133.
[315] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 33.

follows you when you dream. Time ceases to be linear, becomes chaotic, broken down into punctiform divisions. As production and distribution are restructured, so are nervous systems'.[316] Adapting to changes in the labour market imposes a re-wiring of the brain and alternative approaches to life. Fisher's analysis makes sense of Petersen's explanation of errand paralysis as a manifestation of the body and brain acknowledging limitations. On the other hand, the experience of sickness is attributed to millennials' relationship to work. Describing a condition he identifies as 'depressive hedonia', Fisher traces it in millennials as not so much the 'inability to get pleasure' but 'an inability to do anything else *except* pursue pleasure.'[317] Pleasure cannot be found in conditions of enforced labour, where labour must be sold to the capitalist no matter how much displeasure it causes, where the worker must be exploited and immiserated, and where the worker is alienated from her labour. In this sense, millennials embodying *homo oeconomicus* are paradoxically characterised by self-interest, and can also be perceived as expressing a desire to live out a

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[316] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 34.
[317] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 22.

communist fantasy: Plug as a millennial wants to own the means of production but in this version, the means of production is created by Plug and not taken from the capitalist.

The idea that millennials may be characterised by the drive for pleasure may be persuasive, but it may be useful to push beyond the dichotomy between an exclusive pursuit of pleasure and a lack of ability to achieve it. The desire to avoid displeasure by acting passively also becomes significant as burnout. We may recognise in Plug's failure to complete certain tasks the evidence that he is seeking to avoid displeasure. It is a complex situation in which contractual obligations between capital and labour, a desire to further self-interest as *homo oeconomicus*, and a manifestation of labour in the millennial to avoid displeasure emerges. Avoiding displeasure provides structure, discipline, and so on, but displeasure is also important for a balanced condition of the human. Small and frequent moments of individualised pleasure better reflect the condition of the millennial because larger class ambitions – security of labour, housing, and political representation – seem to no longer be possible for this

generation. As another effect of neoliberalism's drive: a further fracturing of life as it is lived.

Taken together, the myriad forms of labour that Plug, as *homo oeconomicus*, takes upon himself to perform, and an understanding of this schizophrenic condition, is reflected in the novel's generic fragmentation. It is largely written in prose that suggests a form of realism, but is also presented as dialogue in the form of drama, with the names of speakers highlighted in bold, followed by a colon, and their words laid out verbatim, as if it is a play. One effect is to situate Plug's first-person narrative against the voices of his characters to further problematise fact and fiction. But this layout also allows for the disruption of the text, the briefest of interludes for Plug's first-person narrative. Additional spaces between sections of prose are a deliberate way in which to communicate a characteristic of the millennial: such literary and formatting decisions indicate Plug's inability to focus; the brief fragments in which his narrative is presented suggests the short attention span constitutive of the millennial as presented here.

Overall, Plug's desire for pleasure is a desire not to be alienated from his labour and expressed by

the text's preoccupation with the Booker Prize. His primary ambition – and indeed, the reason for the book – is a desire to win the highest literary award in Britain and his book, as revealed in an introductory note, is framed by the context of the neoliberalization of the book trade as well as the author's role as *homo oeconomicus*. Plug declares:

> Bookish folk aren't what they used to be. Introverted, reserved, studious. There was a time when bookish folk would steer clear of trendy bars, dinner occasions and gatherings. Any social or public encounters would be avoided at all costs because these activities were very un-bookish. Bookish folk preferred to stay in, or to sit alone in a quiet pub, reading a good book, or getting some writing done. Writers, in fact, perhaps epitomize these bookish traits most strongly. At least they used to.[318]

Acknowledging changes to the book trade, literary production, and the behaviour of authors under neoliberalism, Plug identifies the author not as a cerebral figure but as a public, charismatic one. 'These days', Plug observes, writers 'are commonly found on stage, headlining festivals, or being interviewed on TV. Author events and performances have proliferated, becoming established parts of a writer's role.'[319] The writer's role has, to some extent, always required the characteristics that may

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[318] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 1.
[319] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 1.

be read as *homo oeconomicus*: she must look to herself to produce the creative ideas that compel work, write the book, and send manuscripts off for publication. But under neoliberalism, she must use her human capital on the circuit to ensure future profit. Plug gestures to this reconfiguration of the author's renewed role as a consequence of neoliberal culture. 'It's not that authors have suddenly become more extroverted,' he writes, 'it's more a case that their job description has changed.'[320]

Plug focuses on the challenges bookish authors face who must now mobilise other skills to exist in the new market economy of the literary event. For Plug, these challenges have class components. 'Some are well suited for public life,' he announces, 'particularly those from certain academic backgrounds where public speaking is encouraged and confidence in social situations is shaped and formed.'[321] Plug's book, addresses the lack of structural support otherwise provided by the family or the state; it also points to how the principle of entrepreneurship fails in a socio-economic system that rewards privilege over ability. Providing a

[320] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 1.
[321] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 1.

version of the self-help book for budding writers, Plug targets 'the timid, shy and mousy authors', and 'social wipeouts', who are '[u]nprepared and ill-equipped to face our reader audience'. He provides practical advice to putative readers.[322] 'Stage etiquette, audience questions, book signings, wardrobe, performance' will be observed at various events featuring Booker-Prize-winning authors, Plug tells the reader.[323] Human capital, if it is not embodied, can be observed, learnt, and copied, it is suggested. Plug counts himself as one such socially underdeveloped and aspirant author, who is in need of such a book. The infrastructure to enable Plug's development is entirely absent, so much so that he must create it himself. In one sense, Plug becomes the entrepreneur *par excellence*, identifying and filling a gap in the market from which he will necessarily derive his own fortune: he must be both student and teacher in this model. Yet, this actuality is revealed to be wholly unachievable. Plug is a fine writer, but he knows nothing of the realm of which he is writing; he is not a published writer, has not been submitted for consideration for the Booker Prize, has no

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[322] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 1.
[323] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 1.

experience in public speaking, nor has he experience of speaking about writing.

The ability to observe, learn and perform this form of human capital as it is embodied in the public author is an essential condition to succeed. Plug's subject position reveals he is wholly unqualified because he does not fulfil the cultural requirements to effectively review such proceedings. Clive Bloom provides a spirited evaluation of the role of the reviewer, of which Plug would be proud: 'the reviewer's relationship to ephemeral taste (to the latest fashion) is tempered by an often-unspoken allegiance to tradition and continuity, to organic community and to the moral trajectory of humanist literary production.'[324] Firmly attached to the whims of the market, the reviewer must communicate this rationality in the articles she writes. Crucially, he 'must be seen to be an expert only in as much as he reflects the amateur status of his readers,' becoming in the process a 'trusted friend of the reader rather than the managerial professional that he or she is.' 'Culture,' Bloom writes, 'can only be defended by nature – by the good taste gene: upper middle-class

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[324] Clive Bloom, *Literature, Politics and Intellectual Crisis in Britain Today* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 113.

and Anglo-Saxon is essential'; a critical 'disinterest' is also important, the 'outcome of intense training (usually at the best universities)' and an 'inherited sensibility appropriately displayed in exquisite particularity.'[325] Bloom's assessment establishes the reviewer in terms of the ruling class. Plug's place as a reviewer is, on the one hand, suggested to be inauthentic because of his behaviour and the text's honest presentation of his personal and professional experience. For example, no insight is given into Plug's educational background – although he is scathing of Mr Stapleton's poorly written prose.[326] He does not conform to Bloom's characterisation of the reviewer. On the other hand, the text presents the millennial as a subject able to perform any form of labour, regardless of whether she holds the expertise or the skillset for the given task.

The Booker Prize is apt subject matter for a novel concerned with millennial experience under neoliberalism. The location of the Guildhall (where the Booker Prize ceremony takes place) as coterminous with the City of London, situates the award in direct relation to cultural, financial, and

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[325] Bloom, *Literature Politics and Intellectual Crisis in Britain Today*, pp. 113-114.
[326] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 206.

economic elites. But the conceptual notion of the 'prize' serves as a metaphor for the neoliberal economy in the way that, drawing on Hobbes, Jodi Dean presents the familiar arrangement of labour exchange under capitalism. '[T]he one who performs first in the case of a contract *merits* that which he is to receive from the performance of the other', she writes, and 'Because the first has performed (in accordance with the contract), the second is obliged to give the first what is due him.'[327] Dean argues that employment relations under neoliberalism are constituted in terms of the notion of the prize as a conceptual idea:

> the prize is the product of the event, the contest. The relation between the one awarding the prize and the winner depends on the good will of the giver. Nothing specifically links the winner to the prize. The implication of this shift from contract to contest, from wages to prizes […], is the mobilization of the many to produce the one.[328]

Dean locates this development of 'the prize' in relation to reality television competitions. However, we may recognise in this development the high levels of competition embodied in *homo oeconomicus*. The prize, as a concept, functions centrally in Ewen's text. I have unpacked the ways in which Plug is engaged

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[327] Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, p. 139
[328] Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, p. 140.

in several forms of activity: as a freelance gardener for Mr Stapleton at the same time as using his spare time to produce his own labour. Crucially, however, Plug's aim to win the Booker Prize is fundamentally flawed because it is wholly unattainable. Plug's own book is ethnographic, as he makes clear. 'That's why I've decided to study the ways of the literary event', he announces in the introduction.[329] In a conversation with A.S. Byatt, he offers another characterisation; 'it's like a guidebook. A self-help guide.'[330] Evoking the book as a map in which navigation of a new cultural terrain will be possible, as well as indicating how to improve aspects of the self in this area, Plug describes his text as a work of non-fiction, an altogether different genre from that which is admitted for consideration by the Booker judges. Plug's ambition can never be realised.

In the final moments of the novel, the impossibility of Plug's dream is borne out fully. Addressing the guests at the 2013 Booker Prize ceremony, Plug hopes the audience will allow him to practise his speech for the award he erroneously believes he will win next year. Eventually, Plug is

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[329] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 2.
[330] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 46.

chased from the stage by security guards, narrowly avoiding the police who have been called. In a moment of further irreverence, Plug uses the head of a bronze sculpture of Winston Churchill as a springboard to climb the fifteenth-century wall of the Guildhall. In this moment, he remembers former winners, 'Barry Unsworth was once lauded here, sharing the evening's prize with Michael Ondaatje'.[331] Other dissident and irreverent types are educed: 'John Berger declared his support for the Black Panthers down on that stage, and James Kelman shot off early to join his mates in the pub of Finsbury Park.'[332] Recalling the prize's history of scandal, Plug seeks to equate himself with other literary dissidents. However, as these figures and their various rebellious contributions to the Booker are invoked, including of course Plug's own mischievous intervention, the event continues seamlessly: 'They're serving dessert. The sea of craning faces has been replaced with scalps, many balding, as the guests tuck in'.[333] Scandal, as James English has noted, is an essential component of the Booker Prize 'its lifeblood', English assumes that 'far

[331] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 293.
[332] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 293.
[333] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 293.

from constituting a critique, indignant commentary about the prize is an index of its normal and proper functioning.'[334] Scandalous ripples promote and valorise the prize. John Berger's winner speech is only one such example to which Plug refers. Rather than a source of embarrassment or shame, such moments bolster the Booker's credibility, yield more media attention, and circulate press coverage. But dissent and scandal are both necessary and, ultimately, ignored; food is eaten, the ceremony continues, and the prize maintained, as always. In this way, the prize, as it is accounted for in Ewen's novel, embodies absolute hegemony. Critiques of the Booker only serve to strengthen and bolster its reputation, and in this respect, Ewen's novel gestures to the Booker as reflective of neoliberalism's status as impervious to critique.[335]

Most importantly, the Booker Prize and Ewen's representation of Plug and the scandal associated with it are only ripples in the smooth running of the prize and echo the status that neoliberalism enjoys. As Fisher notes, subversion and dissenting acts are central to capitalism's

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[334] English, *The Economy of Prestige*, p. 208.
[335] Thomas Lemke, 'Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique', *Rethinking Marxism*, 14.3 (2002), 49-64.

dominance. 'What we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials,' he writes, but their '*precorporation*':

> the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist cultures. Witness, for instance, the establishment of settled 'alternative' or 'independent' cultural zones, which endlessly repeat the gestures of rebellion and contestation as if for the first time. 'Alternative' and 'independent' don't designate something outside mainstream culture; rather, they are styles, in fact the dominant styles, within the mainstream.[336]

Capitalist cultures' ability to identify and promote subversive materials as capitalist aesthetics disarm the radicalism encapsulated in such objects. Capitalism's ability to invalidate threats to its functioning by incorporating alternative, independent or subversive modes is essential for its survival. Capitalism's most shocking and scandalous acts (stark global and local inequality, exploitation, neglect, appropriation of resources) are often pointed out or openly paraded. These characteristics are important to thrive and succeed. Indeed, capitalism's boom-and-bust cycle is perhaps the most pronounced example upon which to draw. While it may cause devastating consequences for subjects living under

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[336] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 9.

neoliberalism, the effects of the bust are regarded as the ordinary functioning of the system.

As the final scene of the novel attests, the grim situation Plug faces is impermanent, observed for only a few moments at the peak of the crisis before it wanes altogether, though its effects may continue to be felt. Holding on for life, Plug observes a small stained-glass window, which he hopes to push open to gain access to the roof. He recognizes that, if he were to succeed, his options would be limited and ponders still how he may get out of yet another scrape.[337] 'Anyway', he writes, as a summarising point, 'I've broken the ice, dear reader, cleared the first big hurdle. […] No one died. Of course, it wasn't exactly natural either, not a bit of it. […] And it's possible that I may still die yet…'[338] This abrupt end to the novel registers Plug's indefatigable optimism. In a precarious situation, literally as well as figuratively, despite the dreadful situation in which he finds himself, he is homeless, has little chance of realising his ambition, and is now at imminent risk of death. This scene evokes and articulates an actuality for the millennial working under neoliberalism as

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[337] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, pp. 293-294.
[338] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 294.

precarious; one wrong move and she will, at best, fall into the arms of the juridical mechanisms of state punishment; at worst, this act could result in his death. Yet, crucially, Plug is undeterred. Acknowledging his dreadful position, and despite being suspended for some time, he manages to edge up to the roof in the hope of opening a window and escaping through it: one final barrier prevents readers discovering the outcome: 'I've managed to edge up towards the roof, but these old window latches are as stiff as you like.'[339] Evoking a 'class ceiling' which must be pierced, the novel nods at once to Plug's attempt to ensure his safety and implies his career ambitions may also be realised if he is successful in picking the lock.

However, millennial life is characterised by an inability to progress. This final moment reflects back on the beginning of the novel as a moment in which no formal beginning or ending can be detected: 'The water in Salman Rushdie's glass is rippling.'[340] This supposedly suspenseful ending registers Plug's inability to detect structural injustice as it relates to his own labour. Because Plug must always look to

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[339] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 256.
[340] Ewen, *How To Be A Public Author*, p. 5.

himself, he does not blame structural issues for his situation. Again, the text's formal structure provides an indication of this condition for millennials in a permanent present. Ewen divides his novel into thirty-three sections. These sections are not numbered, and the indication of a shift in emphasis is detected only possible because of the scanned – in copies of different title pages of the novels Plug has had signed by Booker-Prize-winning authors he has visited. Each inscription – with only occasional variation – follows the format of 'To Francis Plug' with the accompanying signature of each author. This format is repeated throughout the novel and raises questions about a sense of authorial progression. Again, we may return to the notion of how the bildungsroman changes for the millennial. There are two points to emphasise: there is a vague sense of progression in the novel in the sense that it ends with the Booker Prize ceremony, a reasonable and perhaps necessary point for the novel to conclude. But the end for Plug in a situation of precarity is essential to understanding the structural quandary in which he finds himself, caught between his individual determination to continue in the face of structural inequality and the obvious and often ignored actuality

of ensuring material obligations are met. In each scene Plug attends a literary event and an exchange with an author takes place, and each time Plug enters into some amusing incident, with Plug as the butt of the joke. Ewen shows the repeatability of everyday experience for millennials caught and held in a perpetual present where progression to home ownership is impossible and career progression cannot be realised. The grim actuality of the quotidian under neoliberalism is precisely the monotonous repetition of the same event, repeated over and over.

The novel's final scene also evokes Lauren Berlant's notion of 'cruel optimism': 'when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing'.[341] Berlant situates this effect with the institutionalisation of neoliberal ideas in America and Europe since the 1980s. Describing a situation in which the thing that is desired is an obstacle to flourishing, Plug's optimism becomes a destructive impulse, but his approach to his predicament reveals something altogether more intriguing. His address to readers invites them to reflect on the predicament he

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[341] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 7.

faces since he seems incapable of doing so. Neoliberalism's intoxicating power cannot be observed by Plug: his desire to achieve his ambitions, despite his desperate situation, is undeterred. However, his fate is not our concern; rather, in recognising his acceptance of capitalist realism, the novel invites readers to consider our own relationship to neoliberal orthodoxy.

Chapter Three:

<u>The Asylum Invasion Complex, Globalisation and</u>
<u>*Homo Sacer*: the Migrant-Refugee in Hari Kunzru's</u>
<u>*Transmission* (2004) and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*</u>
<u>(2017)</u>

Saeed felt it might be possible, in the face of death,
to believe in humanity's potential for building a
better world…

Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West* (2017)

In *Revolting Subjects* (2019), Imogen Tyler explores

how recent public policy in relation to asylum seekers

and refugees is situated in a context of neoliberal

expansionism. Tracing the genesis of the idea of the

'bogus asylum seeker', Tyler identifies the ways in

which government, capital, and the fourth estate

intersect to produce this figure as abject in the early

twenty-first century:

> During this period the government was trying
> to redesign immigration policies in ways
> which would attract more migrant workers to
> Britain in order to sustain Britain's economic
> competitiveness in the global marketplace.
> Attempts to implement 'managed migration'
> policies which would open Britain's borders to
> temporary migrant workers were politically
> unpopular, with claims made from the political
> left and right that neoliberal economic policies
> were pulling too many economic migrants to
> Britain, driving down wages (as intended),
> creating unemployment, putting a strain on

welfare and education systems, and deepening ethnic and racial tensions. The 'refugee crisis' presented a political opportunity to steer the immigration debate away from the issue of migrant labour, towards refugees, a class of migrants who […] would be construed as the major 'immigration problem' of the time.[342]

In Tyler's account of New Labour's immigration policies, the figure of the refugee and others hoping to claim asylum in the UK was elevated to the character of national villain. More specifically, resentment and concern directed, however inadvertently, at capital, and the ambition to reduce workers' wages, was transferred from the economic migrant to the refugee. Framed in popular media discourses as a 'soft touch', Britain was coded as a porous and natural body.

The figure of the refugee and asylum seeker cannot be a useful figure for capital because she cannot serve capital's needs, apart from when she is made a figure of abjection to distract attention away from public hostility directed at migrant labour. Her reliance on the welfare state codes her in equitable terms with the figure of the benefit scrounger and other abject figures such as the chav. These figures are coded for a cultural politics rather than specifically a class politics. Tyler's argument is most

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[342] Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, p. 84.

compelling when it suggests refugees are classed subjects in a discussion of post-2008 neoliberal policies of detention and what she describes as 'the neoliberal economics of illegality.'[343] Tyler identifies three features in this process. First, Tyler claims that punitive treatment of asylum seekers and other 'irregular' migrants has been discursively mobilised to reassert territorial sovereignty and emphasise national pride in a context of welfare state provision reduction. Second, the awarding of government contracts to private companies to oversee the detention and process of asylum applications has produced a multi-million-pound industry. What Tyler calls 'asylum markets', conglomerates are imbricated in the politics of the nation state, with capital at the centre of the binary war over the hero and villain. Such companies are doubly bound up in the economic and social fabric of the nation because they are responsible for providing a host of other services, in education, prisons, the police, and forensic crime and hospitals, as well as the monitoring of benefit claims. This situates refugees and asylum seekers in a politics of class repression by capital, that is enabled by government. Third, detention is the

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[343] Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, p. 93.

outcome of such policies because most outcomes for asylum seekers result in a status of limbo, rather than deportation, with refugee status – if granted – existing for only five years. Work is poorly paid for such figures and individuals in long-term detention may find opportunities for labour exchange only with managers of the detention centres, to undertake cleaning and other menial work in exchange for social benefits while under detention. The figure of the migrant and refugee is subject to phobic construction which is essential to how the character of the nation-state is established. The nation-state is seen to protect itself by managing this marginalized (not excluded or externalized) body.

As Michael Billig demonstrates, 'nationalism suggests that nationhood is near the surface of contemporary life' and its significance in constructing relationships to self and other plays out in the dichotomy between migrants and 'natives' in this discourse.[344] The British nation state and its perceived porous borders are a particular site of contention. For Anoop Nayak, the liminal space between 'the country and the city' that is, the suburbs

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[344] Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 2004), p. 93.

become important in tracing nationalism and racism. Drawing on Raymond Williams, Nayak observes that the suburbs 'are figured through complex "structures of feeling"' that 'constitute asylum seekers and other newcomers through the emotive register of "contagion, depravity and decline".'[345] In what follows, I will explore affective responses to migrants in relation to Tyler's asylum invasion complex, and in particular Sara Ahmed's influential work on fear. Nayak's statement confirms a point of tension between the carnal desire of capitalist exploitation under neoliberalism and specific cultural and affective responses to the arrival of migrants in the liminal locus of the suburbs.[346] The suburbs as a space of white middle-class racism is conveyed implicitly in *Exit West*. Where London is a contested site between nativists and migrants, a city of light and dark, even as the suburbs is ostensibly a space for progress. Hamid's protagonists Saeed and Nadia

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[345] Anoop Nayak, 'Race, affect, and emotion: young people, racism, and graffiti in the postcolonial English suburbs', *Environment and Planning A*, 42 (2010), 2370-2392 (p. 2374). See also Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973); Larry Ray and Kate Reed, 'Community, mobility and racism in a semi-rural area: Comparing minority experience in East Kent', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28.2 (2005), 212-234 (p. 223).

[346] Anoop Nayak, 'Race, affect, and emotion: young people, racism, and graffiti in the postcolonial English suburbs', *Environment and Planning A*, 42 (2010), 2370-2392 (p. 2374).

have fled the danger of their home country for Europe to begin building a new home, and Nadia encounters indigenous Britons for the first time. But the space they occupy becomes untenable and the couple flee for the promise of America, despite being finally guaranteed accommodation in Britain. Not only is the national-territorial space of this novel not disclosed, the suburbs too are left unspecified. As an under-theorised space, the suburbs come to the fore because the reasons for their leaving are never articulated in the novel. The ineffability of the suburbs, it may be inferred, emerges as a space for racism.

Existing in detention centres without legal status, and living in regionally marginalised spaces, the migrant-refugee can be seen to exist between nation, status, and space. Within a neoliberal rubric of exploitation, detention, and demonization, and constituted as a racialised body, these figures become difficult to distinguish.[347] This chapter argues that the

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[347] I am not the only person to recognise this development. Speaking in the context of the emergence of refugee populations in India/Pakistan and Israel/Palestine in mid-century, Stephen Morton recognises the difficulty in demonstrating differences between these figures: It also discloses how colonial and neocolonial state formations have deemed superfluous the lives and livelihoods of people who are thought to be unprofitable to the financial interests of capital. It is in this respected that the economic logic of abandonment renders undecidable the distinction between the refugee and the economic migrant. See Stephen Morton, 'Postcolonial Refugees, Displacement, Dispossession and Economies of Abandonment in the Capitalist

development and expansion of neoliberalism raised by Tyler as constant with pre- and post-2008 neoliberal economic, fiscal and cultural practices, forms a critical component of two twenty-first century fictions: Hari Kunzru's 2004 novel *Transmission* and Mohsin Hamid's 2017 novel *Exit West*.

The Asylum Invasion Complex

Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* has received lively critical attention since publication in 2005. Read as cultural commentary on the HIV/AIDS pandemic, cosmopolitan experience, terrorism, hacking, and global class relations, critical responses to the novel coalesce around the theme of interconnectivity in a global order.[348] *Transmission* opens with the innocent arrival in an email inbox of the Leela virus; represented in the form of Bollywood star Leela

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World System', in *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Postcolonial Writing: New Contexts, New Narratives, New Debates*, ed. Jenni Ramone (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 215-236 (p. 233).

[348] Richard Brock, 'An "onerous citizenship": Globalization, cultural flows and the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Hari Kunzru's *Transmission*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 44.4 (2008), 379-390; Berthold Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 127-153; Liam Connell, 'E-terror: Computer viruses, class and transnationalism in *Transmission* and *One Night @ the Call Center*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 46.3-4 (2010), 279-290; I Filipczak, 'Immigrant to a terrorist: On liquid fears in Hari Kunzru's *Transmission*', 40.2 (2014), 67-76; Leonard, *Literature after Globalization*, pp. 115-140; Emily Johansen, 'Becoming the virus: responsibility and cosmopolitan labor in Hari Kunzru's *Transmission',* Journal of Postcolonial Writing, 49.4 (2013), 419-431.

Zahir, it dances before the unwitting, naïve and lascivious receiver. Upon clicking, the virus is unleashed, permeating the world's nexus of technological interfaces. Since this is the reader's first encounter with Leela, they witness the unleashing of the virus into the space of the novel and only experience the novel – and the world depicted in it – through this universal experience of infection. As Richard Brock observes, HIV/AIDS 'shares with models of globalization its intimate connection with the dissolution of borders and boundaries.'[349] On the one hand, the HIV/AIDS virus operates at the biological level between body and society, body and self. On the other hand, the virus embodies formal qualities of globalisation in its indiscriminate approach to the inviolability of racial, class and national boundaries, but boundaries also determine how the virus is experienced in the world.[350] As I will discuss, *Transmission* challenges such a notion, but Brock's analysis provides a lens for how the allegory of the virus informs a reading of the novel that explores the conceptual interconnectivity between

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[349] Brock, 'An "onerous citizenship"', p. 380.
[350] Brock, 'An "onerous citizenship"', p. 380.

the HIV/AIDS virus pandemic and globalization and its flows of people, ideas, and capital.

That *Transmission* explores early twenty-first century global capitalism is well observed but Emily Johansen also discusses the allegory of the virus and incorporates it into a class analysis of migrant experience. 'The idea of someone who appears healthy and who *believes* themselves to be healthy but is *actually* infectious,' she writes, 'circulates around the healthy carrier. This is analogous to the ambivalence surrounding the migrant who is both positive (hardworking, and readily assimilable) and negative (illegal, not easily or seamlessly incorporated into the national body).'[351] Echoing anxieties around the inability to detect the HIV/AIDS virus, which exists in a contradictory status between an ostensibly uninfected body and an infected biological system, Johansen introduces a doubly problematic rendering of the migrant as a threatening figure because when conceptualised not only endangers the nation but risks contaminating the native population. Such a contamination involves producing anxieties around the issue of replacing

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[351] Johansen, 'Becoming the virus: responsibility and cosmopolitan labor in Hari Kunzru's *Transmission*', p. 421.

native workers with cheaper labour power or that owing to undocumented status they are unable to work, receive welfare support and fail to contribute to local communities.

In *Transmission*, two principal characters, Arjun Mehta and Guy Standing, represent binary figures of global capitalism in the twenty-first century. Arjun is plucked from industrial India to work for a tech firm called Databodies. In the office where he is recruited, he glances above the receptionist's head:

> Above her a row of clocks, relic of the optimistic 1960s, displayed the time in key world cities. New Delhi seemed to be only two hours ahead of New York, and one behind Tokyo. Automatically Arjun found himself calculating the shrinkage in the world implied by this error, but, lacking even a best estimate for certain of the variables, his thoughts trailed away. For a moment or two the image hung around ominously in the brain – the globe contracting like a deflating beach ball.[352]

This encounter in a dingy New Delhi office nods towards the contracting of the globe whereby technology renders people, geography, and capital as immediately exchangeable and intimately close in a spatial and temporal present. Kunzru also illustrates this as a contraction of time in the present of the novel

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[352] Kunzru, *Transmission*, p. 6.

between global centres of urban life and capitalist exchange to show a realigning of time across a longer period of history. The futurity of the 1960s – and its failed optimism – not only confirms subsumption of history into the present (both the future and the past exist in one fixed space for Arjun), but Arjun's future as wrapped in the cloak of 1960s' optimism. More importantly, the novel invites readers to wonder whether this image of the future and the possibility it represented confronted some other hopeful, aspirational figure in the 1960s, in some other place in the world. This moment holds for Arjun the potential for social, upward mobility on a global scale. Who has embarked upon this journey before? In which locations? At what time in recent history? In this way, *Transmission* establishes Arjun as a figure pursuing a journey of social mobility, but he is conjoined with every other aspirational figure in capital, and equally with none of them.

This suggests that neoliberal culture is homogenising. Place, culture, and its embodiment in individual actors is part of class experience as global. Arjun's sister Priti is employed as a call centre worker and, her mother believes, 'is turning into one of these cosmopolitan girls' because of it, in an

anxiety-laden comment.[353] The ways in which the relationship between provincialism and metropolitanism has developed is regarded as regrettable. But this is not only a novel of class mobility, it is also about the global context of communication and technological advancement. To enter the city is to embrace a cosmopolitan subjectivity. On being hired, Priti will

> receive training in Australian language and culture. We all have to be proficient in vernacular slang and accent, and keep day-to-day items of trivia at our fingertips […] Sporting scores. Weather. The names of TV celebrities. It adds value by helping build customer trust and empathy. As operators, we even have to take on new Australian identities. A nom de guerre, the manager calls it. What do you think of Hayley?[354]

Such a subjectivity obfuscates her Indian identity and converts her into a supposedly global citizen. For Leonard, this moment in *Transmission* registers 'a vacillating commitment to cultural and national belonging' and suggests, as with Arjun's status, an optimistic future where various class identities, both local and global, can be inhabited at the same time as performing neither. But, Leonard notes, this new cosmopolitanism is limited spatially: 'India's burgeoning telecoms industry therefore offers Priti

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353 Kunzru, *Transmission*, p. 19.
354 Kunzru, *Transmission*, p. 17.

the opportunity to redefine herself and her cultural habitus, even if her entry into the knowledge-based global economy leaves her firmly rooted in New Delhi.'[355] Priti's ambition to adopt this cultural habitus is precisely that: acting out an Australian subjectivity is confined to the local space of New Delhi. Priti has no ambition to move to Australia or live the life of an Australian. In the first instance, this is neoliberalism as neo-colonialism, exporting Western subjectivities to the postcolonies. Secondly, and contradictorily, Priti may be recognised as a global citizen. Leonard suggests that despite entering the emergent economy of the telecommunications industry, being rooted in India is a paradox in Priti's emergence as a cosmopolitan citizen. Instead, though, the novel suggests that cosmopolitan citizenry may flower in urban areas of the developing world. Indeed, Priti's assertion that 'this is the best job in the world' seems to confirm the positive upward mobility she experiences in this role and is incommensurate with Arjun's fate of turning from social aspirant to global terrorist.

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[355] Leonard, *Literature After Globalisation*, p. 121.

Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2004) offers an analysis of embodiment and corporeality that treats the virus as a force that infects the nation. Taking as a starting point a British National Party poster, which described 'swarms of illegal immigrants and bogus asylum seekers [who] invade Britain by any means available to them', Ahmed posits the notion of Britain as a 'soft touch'. The metaphor of a 'soft touch' suggests that 'the nation's borders and defences are like skin; they are too soft, weak, porous, and easily shaped or even bruised by the proximity of others'.[356] In this way, the nation is corporealized and thus conjures a feminised national body which can be penetrated, violated, infected.[357] The allegory of the computer virus affirms and contests far-right narratives that view viral infection restrictively in terms of a national, rather than global, contamination. This proposition designates myriad collective identities – of the individual, the nation, and the world – predicated on the notion of fear. Ahmed conceptualises fear as 'concerned with the preservation not simply of "me",

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[356] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 1-2.
[357] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, pp. 1-2. See also Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, pp. 79-96; and pp. 87-90.

but also "us", or "what is", or "life as we know it", or even "life itself".' On the one hand, it might be fear of being 'incorporated into the body of the other' that establishes others as 'fearsome insofar as they *threaten to take the self in*'.[358] This is a fear of the individual and if a collective (or national) body. In this articulation of fear, the immigrant or refugee becomes a threatening symbol and consequently, becomes a figure of transformation of the individual, the nation, and the globe.

If the refugee, asylum seeker and economic migrant constitute similar status under neoliberalism, Ahmed's analysis adds another dimension that 'the figure of the international terrorist has been mobilised in close proximity to the figure of the asylum seeker.'[359] In an amendment to the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001, any figure applying for refugee status is not privy to the protections offered to her class if she is suspected of being a terrorist. We can assume, Ahmed claims, that '*of any body in the nation* (subjects, citizens, migrants, even tourists) the asylum seeker is most likely to be the international terrorist'. The result is that 'those who seek asylum,

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[358] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 64. Italics in the original.
[359] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 79.

who flee from terror and persecution may be bogus *insofar as they could be the agents of terror and persecution.*'[360] This narrative compounds the threat posed to the figure of the economic migrant, asylum seeker and refugee because not only does fear – in Ahmed's terminology – stick to such bodies, it does so in a myriad of ways: infecting the work place, removing native workers as the 'rightful' holders of posts, or abstracting money from workers in the form of state support. We may also add that a fear of terrorism is, attached to these figures, also the fear of harm, death, and in class terms, evokes the threat this figure poses to security in the labour market, which is to say, the threat of job, work, employment, and income security.

Transmission emphasises these fears when the act of terror – the virus – upends global capitalist exchange, destabilising the PR company Guy Swift runs, problematising border security, and generally ruptures the functionality of communicative capitalism. The virus encapsulates this fear of the migrating figure as one that appears superficially safe but is ultimately destructive and unleashes its

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[360] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, pp. 79-80. Italics in the original.

destructive terrorist potentiality. Kunzru's representation of terrorism removes the horror of bodily violence but equally confirms the threat such a figure poses. *Exit West* presents the fear of the asylum invasion complex in its representation of an ungovernable and unregulatable system of global migratory flows. Hamid focuses predominantly on Nadia and Saeed, young, educated subjects in an unnamed country in the Middle East. Figures of enforced migration, they are forced to Europe and then the United States after civil war breaks out in their home country. They undertake the kind of perilous journey reported by journalists, but Hamid introduces a magical realist element. A door to transport the couple abroad. 'A normal door', Hamid writes, 'could become a special door, and it could happen without warning, to any door at all', causing Nadia and Saeed to check the doors of their homes in the hope they may be transported from the war-torn city in which they live.[361] The novel provides countless examples of passages being opened before it announces rumours of doors materialising arbitrarily: a man emerges from a wardrobe and drops stealthily to an Australian street; two young Filipina

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[361] Hamid, *Exit West*, pp. 69-70.

women emerge from a black portal in Japan; an ex-serviceman in San Diego, California, overlooks the Pacific Ocean and observes the army move to secure incoming migrants via the portals.[362] The portals nullify the efficacy of, and need for, the border as a mechanism of state and population control. Likewise, concomitant demands on border security – the requirement to produce papers, justify reasons for entry, and declare a proposed time frame for departure – are removed as a concern: people, from all corners of the world, may move freely between different localities.

The novel examines myriad threats posed by the potentiality of unfettered migration: a largescale militaristic response to deter incoming migrants, 'nativist' protests of violence against large numbers of settled migrants, and a terrorist attack in Vienna perpetrated by militants who sneak through a portal, throwing the world into chaos.[363] *Exit West* names the destinations to which Nadia and Saeed make their home: the Greek Island of Mykonos, London, and Marin, California. Yet, their country of origin remains mysterious and thereby presents every and

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[362] Hamid, *Exit West*, pp. 5-8, pp. 25-28, pp. 45-48.

[363] Hamid, *Exit West*, pp. 45-48, pp. 130-131, p. 160, p. 131, p. 104.

any country in the Middle East. This anonymising and homogenising of asylum seekers' experience renders such figures as mysterious, lacking history, and chances constructing them from a Western perspective. As a result, the novel risks inviting other Euro-centric value judgments to be made about them, such as terrorist, benefit scrounger, and jobless, and therefore registers anxiety about invasion from the Middle East.

The journey from the Middle East to Greece and London evokes many perilous journeys asylum seekers took from Syria to Southern Europe during the height of migrations in 2015. In removing this dangerous journey, the novel indicates British fear about the asylum invasion complex: securitisation, border security, the checkpoint is immediately bypassed, as though by an underground passage or more accurately, an act of teleportation. The authorities can only attempt to unearth the locations of continually emerging portals, attempt to monitor them, and to disperse the populations once they have successfully passed through to the new location. The portal neutralises the drive of borders and nation states towards securitisation and intensifies the asylum invasion complex. Entry points are

multitudinous, localised, and impossible to track, no longer the Channel Tunnel, Dover or any other port. Migrants may appear in front rooms, bathrooms, bedrooms. This development introduces a state of anxiety that dominates the world of the novel when governments in the West respond with intense severity.

It is in the novel's emphasis on forms of securitisation within Western nation states after the migrants arrive that a new globalised class of subjects can be located. The tradition whereby workers in the developing world produce and manufacture products for consumption by those in the developed world is predicated on hierarchies of consumption and production and *Transmission* and *Exit West* are preoccupied with the emergence of a new set of global class relations that incorporates and responds to neoliberal capitalism. Western privilege is dismantled under neoliberalism's drive to command hegemony. It is precisely in the moment in which securitisation – in service to fears around the asylum invasion complex – concretises itself as a concern that this new status begins to emerge. This is the subject of the following section.

Globalisation: Technology, Exchange, Labour

Transmission and *Exit West* are concerned with the ways in which technology facilitates new threats. Responding to the Council of Europe's (CoE) Convention on Cybercrime, and the threat cybercrime poses, Leonard notes how technology challenges the epistemological determinacy of nation states. According to the convention, 'it is the virtual movement of information,'

> rather than the material passage of migrants, tourists, or trade, that is seen to diminish nation-states' sovereign power and, without declaring the principle of national sovereignty to be obsolete, the CoE suggests that the idea of circumscribed and self-determined territoriality is, at the very least, a troubled one. Such assertions seem to lend political and legislative weight to the now-familiar sense that being and *topos* are becoming dissociated, that we are becoming the inhabitants of a postnational world and that governmental autonomy is being ceded to technologized global networks.[364]

The exchange of information becomes the primary impulse of global interconnectivity that undermines borders and nation states, even more than capital exchange or migrancy. This technological interconnectivity is a glue that holds the world together, allowing global capitalism to function. If information flows become the primary mode of exchange in a globally interconnected world, then

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[364] Leonard, *Literature After Globalisation*, pp. 117-118.

class struggle in the traditional sense of confrontation, like withholding labour, will be almost impossible. Social media participation, increased reliance on platforms to deliver services, and use of the web to navigate daily life, such as maps, ensure the inclusion of workers in the global capitalist system of exchange, so much so that withdrawal is increasingly impossible. One site of confrontation is the object of threat to this movement of information flows is in the figure of the hacker.

When Arjun unleashes the virus, it infects and destroys late capitalism's technological infrastructure. The virus 'is not one thing' and 'not even a set or a group or a family. She was a swarm, a horde.'[365] Leela is an amorphous mass – 'so many Leelas. So many girls with the same face' Kunzru writes: 'There were versions of her that broke completely with the past, that were targeted at the complex operating systems used by businesses and universities, at the stripped down ones designed for cell phone handsets and personal organizers.'[366] Gesturing towards a futurity in the present, Leela is totalising and ostensibly unstoppable. She evokes

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[365] Kunzru, *Transmission*, p. 113.
[366] Kunzru, *Transmission*, p. 113.

fears of unstoppable flows of disease, migrancy, and capital, but Leela also comes to embody an unquantifiable whole of individual similarities. Leela embodies an anonymous and disruptive threat to information exchange. If, as Leonard notes, 'identifying, regulating and criminalizing the hacker is now seen as necessary for the emergence of international community', then this determination misses the point.[367] It is the effective impact of the virus, in its anonymous infection of the world's technological infrastructure and the closing down of the mechanisms of exchange, which is more significant. Leela is a form of resistance and the Leelas are precisely 'a revolution in code.'[368]

However, Arjun unleashes the virus in an embarrassing display of naivety in an attempt to win his job back; '*All I wanted was to work and be happy and live a life in magic America*'.[369] In unleashing Leela, unwitting effects are produced: Arjun 'has become a hero to a younger generation of disaffected hackers', Kunzru writes, 'who feel their contributions are undervalued by the corporations and

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[367] Leonard, *Literature After Globalisation*, p. 118.
[368] Kunzru, *Transmission*, p. 287.
[369] Kunzru, *Transmission*, p. 287.

misunderstood by an ignorant and hostile public'.[370]

Glamorising the figure of the dissident as a hacker, Arjun is implicitly incorporated into a celebrity of the precariat. At one moment, he is claimed to appear at an anti-globalisation protest in New York City, another occasion sees him implicated in the autonomist movement in Italy, and elsewhere his face is printed on t-shirts as part of an anti-capitalist campaign. Arjun's unwitting act of revolution is reconfigured by networks of anonymous activist groups because it is not the act of unleashing Leela and the destruction she causes that is significant but the moment of political transformation this moment yields.

If informational exchange and the figure of the hacker provide a moment – unwittingly or otherwise – of revolutionary potential the moment is played out in the scrambling of data information:

> The 'shuffling' action of *Leela08*, which randomly reassociates database attributes, was responsible for the destruction of a huge number of EU immigration records before it was finally spotted and the system closed down […]. The same infection in machines hosting the Eurodac fingerprint database produced a number of false positives, identifying innocent people as known criminals, failed asylum seekers or persons being monitored by European intelligence services. Combinations

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[370] Kunzru, *Transmission*, p. 287.

of the two types of infection led (at a conservative estimate) to some thirty mistaken deportations. Since Operation Atonium relied almost entirely on two bullet-pointed strengths – […] *the fast identification of deportation candidates through Eurodac and the SIS; and* […] *special powers to accelerate processing of deportation candidates* – it led to a situation in which (among other abuses) people were plucked from their homes at night and deposited in some of the world's more troubled places without so much as a change of clothes, let alone money or a way of contacting home.[371]

Subverting the juridical hierarchies in Europe that administers deportations to undocumented persons, the virus undermines the fixity of European citizenship and the globalised class privilege it confers. The consequences of it contain an ironic plot twist because the virus designed to prevent Arjun's deportation from the United States to India, disrupts Western citizenship models, neutralising class distinctions across nation states, or as Connell puts it, 'Mehta's "terrorism" manages to transform the structures of inequality that data are used to support by rendering the distinctions between subjects that inhabit opposite ends of an international order of labour relations unreadable.'[372] Made in the image of Arjun's anxieties around labour, precarity and

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[371] Kunzru, *Transmission*, p. 283.

[372] Liam Connell, 'E-terror: Computer viruses, class and transnationalism in *Transmission* and *One Night @ the Call Center*', p. 286.

deportation, this constitutes a new world order and captures the potential for European citizenship to be re-constituted to reflect emerging global and cosmopolitan hierarchies.

If *Transmission* represents a developed world in which the constituted figures of European privilege – for Lyndsey Stonebridge, the 'rights rich'[373] – become exchangeable for those without such status, Kunzru also views it as a reassurance for neoliberal globalisation's hegemonic dominance. Revolution is a term employed in myriad contexts but when politicians call for a political revolution, they are not calling for government and capitalism's structuring principles and drives to be overthrown. On the contrary, revolution is predicated on a desire to reform and restructure power relations within such a system. Revolution within capitalist relations does not overthrow them. As Emily Johansen argues, *Transmission* 'points to the possibilities of arranging existing global hierarchies in new ways' and 'imagines the potential for disrupting existing class hegemonies tied to the expansion and exploitation of neoliberal capital.'[374] It may be more accurate to

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[373] Lyndsey Stonebridge, *Placeless People: Writing, Rights, and Refugees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. viii.
[374] Johansen, 'Becoming the Virus', pp. 420-1.

claim that the Leela virus, rather than realising a 'revolution in code', is a 'reformation in code.'

The character of Guy Swift is a case in point. Guy runs a PR company called *Tomorrow**, which works with European border security to support the creation of an elite club: '"Citizenship is about being one of the gang, or as we like to say at *Tomorrow**, 'in with the in crowd'. As everyone knows, being in the in crowd is a question of attitude"'.[375] A specific subjectivity of futurity has become essential to confirm your place in Europe but values and subjectivity are proved to be false when owing to the scrambling effects of data by Leela08, Guy's identity is switched with an Albanian international: 'As one man addressed [Guy] in bursts of rapid French, the second translated into a strange guttural language full of *z's* and *j's*. Guy kept asking them to speak in English, repeating that he did not understand, that there had been a mistake.'[376] Codes of European signification – language, mannerisms, ethnicity – make no difference to Guy's newly received status because as it is recorded on the database. Information, the most important characteristic in

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[375] Kunzru, *Transmission*, p. 253.
[376] Kunzru, *Transmission*, p. 282.

global power relations, as it relates to citizenship, has been changed, and identity reassigned.

Imbued with irony, Guy's case serves to highlight the plight of figures stripped of their status in brutal ways. This scene also confirms Arjun's act of *reformation* as one conducted within a neoliberal paradigm. Europe, its borders and the privileges they protect, are maintained. The virus therefore is a metaphor for the reconfiguration of class power as it occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, and this character's experience, supremely ironic as it is, echoes what political themes have identified as when Harvey states: 'While neoliberalization may have been about the restoration of class power, it has not necessarily meant the restoration of economic power to the same people.'[377] Hierarchies of biopolitical power remain intact in *Transmission*. In this way, information serves at once as the structuring principle of world governance and against Guy's own principles, borders are reaffirmed and framed in material ways. In this sense, *Transmission* anticipates current and ongoing policy debates around immigration to Britain more and other neoliberal states where

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[377] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 31.

securitisation, detention, and deportations are key mechanisms of neoliberalism.

Exit West examines the issues via a different metaphor for informational flows. The portal represents, on the one hand an irrational fear that migrancy is at once unregulated and unregulatable given the ease with which people are able to move between different territories in the world. On the other hand, the portal signifies the easy exchange of information in a hyper-technologized world. As data move easily across borders in a globalised world system of informational exchange, bodies are made equally and easily interchangeable, provided the conduit (email, internet access, admittance to a portal) can be located and used. The portal becomes a metaphor for an interconnected world, where the exchange of bodies and data are synonymous.[378]

Exit West's concern with globalisation as informational exchange, however, extends beyond the movement of data or bodies across borders. 'In their phones were antennas,' readers learn, 'and these antennas sniffed out an invisible world, as if by magic, a world that was all around them, and also

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[378] Hamid, *Exit West*, pp. 45-48, p. 88.

nowhere, transporting them to places distant and near, and to places that had never been and would never be.'[379] The world, then, oscillates between the material and the technological, the biological and the invisible, the present and the absent, the spatially local and the spatially faraway, the real and the imagined. Hamid suggests other worlds produced by or within the world – that is, those worlds produced virtually, online, as well as culturally. The commitment to express these alternative worlds in the space of the novel allows for recognition of the world as many worlds, at the same time as being one. In Franco Moretti's terms, built on the foundations of the world-system school of economic history, a world theory of literature is constituted by a single totalising writing with difference: 'One, and unequal: *one* literature (*Weltliteratur*, singular, as in Goethe or Marx), or perhaps better, one world literary system (of inter-related literatures); but a system which is different from what Goethe and Marx had hoped for, because it's profoundly unequal.[380] Recognising the totalising one, and the stratified differences constituted within such a one, is crucial for any

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[379] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 35.
[380] Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review*, 1 (2000), pp. 54-68 (p. 55-56).

Marxist literary project, if it is to prove persuasive. In Hamid's novel, however, there is a shift away from the verticality that Moretti's statement assumes to a thickening of notions of how a world literature is made evident. One moment where this thickening can be observed is when Saeed shows Nadia images on his phone by an anonymous French photographer of famous world cities at night. All light has been removed, the glow of the stars providing the sole source of light in the images. The photographer, Saeed informs her, 'had to go to deserted places':

> Places with no human lights. For each city's sky he went to a deserted place that was just as far north or south, at the same latitude basically, the same place that the city would be in a few hours, with the Earth's spin, and once he got there he pointed his camera in the same direction.' [Nadia asks:] 'So he got the same sky the city would have had if it was completely dark? 'The same sky, but at a different time.'[381]

Time, space and place have become interchangeable. The night skies of New York, Rio de Janeiro, Shanghai and Paris are interchangeable, replaced by comparable places on earth which, from the vantage point of the world, produce the same cosmic effect. In this moment, the novel produces two effects: one is that the world is constituted by the stars and that

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[381] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 54.

borders are drawn latitudinally; the second is that anonymous places on the earth – places without significant economic development and high populations – are constituted as comparable to prominent global centres. The significance of major global cities is reduced to their materiality as products of industrial economies and of capitalist investment.

Refiguring *homo sacer*

If read against Moretti's description of the contemporary moment as both one and unequal, *Exit West* offers a countervailing view that I discern by incorporating Giorgio Agamben's conceptualisation of *homo sacer* to explore the precariat coming into being in late capitalism in two specific ways: first, in relation to the downward mobility of workers in the developed world into a state or precarisation, as if realising the fears narrativised as the asylum invasion complex, and second, in relation to the equalising effects of global capitalism where the world's sites become constituted as comparable. *Transmission* is suggestive of the first and *Exit West* the second.

Agamben's concept of *homo sacer* has been employed variously across political, social science,

and literary studies since he advanced it around twenty years ago. This concept has been deployed for the fictionalisation of the 1984 Bhopal disaster, in Palestinian poetry studies of the checkpoint in the West Bank, and in South Asian women's writing.[382] Agamben's concept is a way of making sense of literary interventions into pressing geopolitical concerns. Methodologically, it poses some potential problems. As Stephen Morton notes, it is a notably masculinised form so *homo sacer* may cause problems for analyses of female characters and their experiences. This problem is encapsulated in Agamben's reliance on the dichotomy of *bios* and *zoē*, terms that refer to two forms of life, where *bios* historically excludes women altogether. Moreover, Agamben's focus on the European context and the statelessness and persecution of Jewish refugees in the mid-twentieth century suggests another potential methodological problem. For the analysis here, however, these methodological issues are less pressing because *Transmission* and *Exit West* are

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[382] For example, Morton, 'Postcolonial Refugees, Displacement, Dispossession and Economies of Abandonment in the Capitalist World System', pp. 215-236; Anna Ball, 'Kafka at the West Bank checkpoint: de-normalizing the Palestinian encounter before the law', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 50.1 (2014), 75-87.

concerned with deportations to Europe and entry into Europe, and allow for an extension to Agamben's analysis of Europe in terms of postcolonial refugeeism and deportation out of Britain to mainland Europe. If we read Agamben's *homo sacer* through Hamid and Kunzru it shapes theories of a new universalism, which reorients the world to imagine itself as global. In *Exit West*, for example, Hamid writes of the potential to imagine a better world order: 'it is in the face of death, to believe in humanity's potential for building a better world.'[383]

Guy Swift's deportation to Albania at the end of *Transmission* serves as an ironic confirmation of Europeans' anxieties that migration – for labour or sanctuary – will result in their own citizenship status being undermined. In Guy's case, his downgrading of status is the result of Arjun, a figure of global precarity. This deportation, Connell argues, 'is regarded as an abuse only because its object is mistakenly identified. Implicitly, this account suggests that no similar concern would be extended to the operation's intended victims'.[384] Hamid throws

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[383] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 202.
[384] Connell, 'E-terror: computer viruses, class and transnationalism in *Transmission* and *One Night @ the Call Center*', p. 286.

into sharp relief the idea that this would have been regarded as the correct functioning of western biopolitics.[385] A further implication is that Guy's status, like that of others comparable to him, should be sacrosanct. In this moment, therefore, Guy is constituted as a figure of *homo sacer*, the figure from Roman law, who can be killed, but not sacrificed.[386] In Agamben's specification of this Roman figure, two types of life are identified: *bios* refers to political life, 'a qualified form of life', political and social life; *zoē* is what Agamben refers to as 'bare life', animal life, 'natural reproductive life.'[387] In its original context, *bios* refers to men of status, whereas *zoē* to women, children, the mentally ill, slaves, and animals. In contemporary European culture, there is no linguistic distinction between these two forms of life, and Agamben consciously acknowledges this distinction to transpose *homo sacer* into a contemporary European context.[388]

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[385] Connell, 'E-terror: computer viruses, class and transnationalism in *Transmission* and *One Night @ the Call Center*', p. 286.

[386] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[387] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 1.

[388] I have already described Standing's observation of the process of de-citizenship for migrants. In the UK, men and women are born with citizenship, providing specific national genealogies are located in Britain, with a promise of further

While these two forms are not necessarily exclusive figures with *bios* inhabit *zoē*. She who has *bios* and therefore political, social life, also has animal life, bare life, but as Agamben shows, the reverse is not guaranteed. *Homo sacer*, who once enjoyed *bios* status, is stripped of it by 'the sovereign', once monarch, but now is recognised as those who hold electoral power over s/he who is sovereign. In this formulation, a figure embodying *zoē* is excluded from *bios*, is not *homo sacer*, and has only ever had bare life, stripped of rights. As a result, *homo sacer* exists beyond both *bios* and *zoē* in a disgraced state. Guy's deportation may be understood as an abuse, but is clarified when read through Agamben's concept because *homo sacer* is stripped of *bios* in a state of exception, where the sovereign suspends the rule of law, and *homo sacer* may be killed but not sacrificed:

> [*homo sacer*] has been excluded from the religious community and from all political life: he cannot participate in the rites of his *gens*, nor […] can he perform any juridically valid act. What is more, his entire existence is reduced to a bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save

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rights guarantees upon reaching the age of eighteen. One group that exists outside of such guarantees are, of course, migrants and especially postcolonial migrants. These figures are subject to deportations, as Standing shows. The figure of *zoē* today more readily incorporates the experience of migrancy.

himself only in perpetual flight or a foreign land.[389]

In *Transmission*, Guy is excluded from political life when his citizenship status is revoked and he is no longer able to participate in elections or, in this moment, to conduct pre-arranged business meetings.[390] The authorities' removal of Guy's citizenship, resulting in his concomitant deportation, is met with an indignant resistance: 'He made so much trouble,' Kunzru writes,

> that he was taken across the tarmac on to the specially chartered plane with his hands and legs cuffed to a wheelchair. Tape was stuck over his mouth to stop him shouting, and a motorcycle helmet was shoved down over his head to prevent him biting his escorts or knocking himself out.[391]

The removal of *bios* is confronted by Guy in his acting out of bare, animal life in this scene. Yet, a paradoxical tension exists between the desire to flee and his desire to remain under the rubric of neoliberal globalisation. Forced deportation reveals the biopolitical mechanisms of domination that operate under this system. The driving impulse of biopolitical power, in Theresa May's phrase, is to 'deport first, appeals later' and troubles the figure of *homo sacer*

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[389] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 183.
[390] Kunzru, *Transmission*, p. 283.
[391] Kunzru, *Transmission*, p. 283.

as killed but not sacrificed.[392] As *Transmission* implies, the figure of *homo sacer* embodied in Guy becomes precisely she who can be deported, but not killed.

Guy's deportation contradicts Agamben's conceptualisation of *homo sacer* and establishes movement, flight, mobility as a response to biopolitical power. Anticipating the journey of many asylum seekers fleeing the Syrian civil war, Guy eventually negotiates the short stretch of the Mediterranean Sea via a 'small inflatable dinghy'. Almost drowned, he is washed up on the shore of the Italian east coast, and helped by his Bangladeshi companions. Guy's story is both reminiscent of the journeys of migrants and a portent of future attempts to breach the European border.[393] This journey sits in direct contrast to Guy's previous enjoyment of cosmopolitanism, where business relationships and travel between the West's metropolises is understood as forward thinking, progressive, and superior. Reflecting what Gilroy terms 'the cosmopolitanism of capitalism' as well as indicating a depoliticised,

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[392] '"Deport first, appeal later" policy ruled unlawful', <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-40272323> [accessed 14 June 2017].

[393] Kunzru, *Transmission*, p. 284.

overly moralised idea of embodied connectivity, Guy's experience now in the position of a refugee situates these contradictory experiences of cosmopolitanism in the same narrative to emphasise the way in which perceived notions of class and racial privilege can be undermined.[394]

In undertaking the same trajectory as other refugees and in particular, revealing how the mechanisms of communicative capitalism re-write Guy's identity as such a figure, lays bare the impermanence of privilege under neoliberalism, at the same time as recognising the centrality of movement in the figure of the migrant subject. The experience is suggestive of Sara Ahmed's contention that emotions always 'involve a process of movement or association' between bodies, across spaces, and through time to create 'the rippling effect of emotions'.[395] The new global and local spaces he inhabits, the migrants Guy exists with now and owes his life to, results in a transformation of his sense of

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[394] Such cosmopolitanism, as Berthold Schoene notes, is to be enjoyed to the full by everybody, except, possibly, a few inveterate "locals."' What is more, this version of cosmopolitanism suffered a 'class-blindness' and Schoene asks 'Who has ever really enjoyed the kind of untrammelled access to the world […]? And whose lives, by contrast, continue to be blighted by this access being in actual fact available only to the privileged few?' See Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel*, pp. 2-3.
[395] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, pp. 44-45.

identity and subjectivity. Guy's involuntary, downward mobility registers the downgrading of status in a world system, a loss of rights and citizenship. He is spatially reconstituted in non-western global locations and re-made as a global class and racial subject.

Representing the impermanence of class privilege under neoliberalism and incorporating a new subject position understood in terms of mobility, Hamid ensures Guy is finally rendered as immobile. Living as a hermit at the novel's close, Guy rejects community-based notions of cosmopolitanism – what Greg Noble terms 'everyday cosmopolitanism'[396] – and adopts a life of insularity. Closed off from the world in which he enjoyed a political life, Guy takes on the figure of *homo sacer* in an alternative way. Rather than characterised by flight, Guy is stripped of *bios* – his business, social and economic status, and ability to exist among and between Western metropolises. He exists alone. In this sense, Guy's status complicates Agamben's conceptualisation of *homo sacer* as a figure in

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[396] Greg Noble, 'Everyday Cosmopolitanism and the Labour of Intercultural Community', in *Everyday Multiculturalism*, ed. by Amanda Wise and Selvaraj Velayutham (Baskingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 46-65 (p. 55).

perpetual flight. In my reading, a breach exists between the events of the novel and Agamben's conceptualisation of *homo sacer* because Guy cannot be constituted as a refugee proper because Kunzru ensures he is ultimately able to re-enter the UK, although the experience results in a new existence. In isolation and stasis, Guy is re-constituted in a foreign land within Britain. It is in this way that Hamid's fiction both recognises and anticipates Britain as a 'divided country.'[397]

If *homo sacer* is a figure marked by mobility – 'perpetual flight' and existing in 'a foreign land', and Guy's relationship to this concept is troubled in *Transmission*, Nadia and Saeed in *Exit West* embody this figure in earnest. Hamid writes:

> Saeed desperately wanted to leave his city, in a sense he always had, but in his imagination he had thought he would leave it only temporarily, intermittently, never once and for all, and this looming potential departure was altogether different, for he doubted he would come back and the scattering of his extended family and his circle of friends and acquaintances, for ever, struck him as deeply sad, as amounting to the loss of a home, no less, of his home.'[398]

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[397] Philip Stephens, 'Brexit is the certain route to a divided Britain', *Financial Times*, 10 January 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/2538628c-1423-11e9-a581-4ff78404524e> [accessed 15 February 2019].

[398] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 90.

Becoming conscious of his future status of one in perpetual flight – or more precisely of an awareness that he will never return home – is recognised as both forced and necessary. This moment both contradicts and affirms Nadia and Saeed as *homo sacer* because the decision to flee is ostensibly imbued with the couple's self-determination as well as forced by social breakdown in their home country. The removal of their status is at once voluntary and involuntary, a tension between individual agency and structural factors read here in relation to *homo sacer*.

Nadia and Saeed's status as *homo sacer*, which sees them move between the unspecified country of origin, to Mykonos, London, and Marin in California, is complicated by the introduction of 'the camp.' Where 'conversations focused mainly on conspiracy theories':

> the status of the fighting, and how to get out of the country – and since visas, which had long been near-impossible, were not truly impossible for non-wealthy people to secure, and journeys on passenger planes and ships were therefore out of the question, the relative merits, or rather risks, of the various overland routes were guessed at, and picked apart, again and again.[399]

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[399] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 50.

Conflict between the governing party and militants results in the removal of status. Borders are bolstered. Events register the removal of rights and local businesses are suspended.[400] The government suspends the country's communication networks, a decision 'made over television and radio, a temporary anti-terrorism measure, it was said, but with no end date given. Internet connectivity was suspended as well.'[401] The internet, as a conduit of interconnectivity, is restricted and is coded in terms of human rights. 'Deprived of the portals to each other and to the world provided by their mobile phones, and confined to their apartments by the night-time curfew', Hamid discusses how 'Nadia and Saeed, and countless others felt marooned and alone and much more afraid.'[402] Interconnectivity through an infrastructure of communicative capitalism maintains the normalcy of daily life and its removal strips away *bios*. The novel gestures towards an essential feature of Agamben's figure in a state of exception that is constitute the camp.

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[400] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 67.
[401] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 55.
[402] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 55.

In my reading, Hamid evokes Agamben's conceptualisation of the camp. The camp, Agamben writes, is 'born not out of ordinary law […] but out of a state of exception and martial law.'[403] In moments of incredible national difficulty, as perceived by sovereign power, the suspension of the judicio-political realm, enables the internment or 'protective custody' of figures seen as state exceptions. Agamben explains that the state of exception '*ceases to be referred to as an external and provisional state of factual danger and comes to be confused with juridicial rule itself.*' The result is 'the camp':

> *the space that is opened up when the state of exception begins to become the rule.* In the camp, the state of exception, which was essentially a temporary suspension of the rule of law on the basis of a factual state of danger, is now given a permanent spatial arrangement, which as such nevertheless remains outside the normal order.[404]

The temporary implementation of a state of exception, whereby ordinary juridicial commitments are suspended, becomes a permanent function of government and everyday life. Agamben draws heavily on the implementation of this policy in Germany during the 1930s and 1940s, and since

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[403] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 166-167.
[404] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 168-169.

Homo Sacer was published in 1998, its application to western domestic and foreign policy actions – to terrorist suspects in Guantanamo Bay, detention centres for migrants and refugees, and the Israel-Palestine conflict – raises different iterations of the concept as it (re-)emerges in various and unfolding social, political contexts of the early twentieth century.[405] The emergence of the camp out of the state of exception in *Exit West* emphasises how it arises out of the juridicial order of Nadia and Saeed's country of origin with road blockades, reduction in basic supplies, and the removal of the communication networks.

Exit West locates the camp as reproduced across the world. In Mykonos, it is a 'refugee camp', an area for refugees who emerge through the portals to live and sleep. It reflects the world because included within it are 'hundreds of tents and lean-tos and people of many colours and hues'.[406] They are 'gathered around fires that burned inside upright oil

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[405] Fleur Johns, 'Guantanamo Bay and the Annihilation of the Exception', *The European Journal of International Law*, 16.4 (2005), 613-635; Paul James Pope and Terence M. Garrett, 'America's *Homo Sacer*: Examining U.S. Deportation Hearings and the Criminalization of Illegal Immigration', *Administration & Society*, 45.2 (2013), 157-186; Ball, 'Kafka at the West Bank checkpoint: de-normalizing the Palestinian encounter before the law'.
[406] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 100.

drums.'[407] The figures who populate it speak in a 'cacophony that [were] the languages of the world, what one might hear if one were a communications satellite, or a spymaster tapping into a fibre-optic cable under the sea.'[408] Evoking the world's communicative interconnectivity and figures from the Global South, the novel intervenes in liberal notions of harmonious inter-sociality. Hamid seems to propose, as Noble does, that 'cosmopolitanism' is a 'form of practice rather than [a] moral virtue': an 'intercultural community' which works 'across ethnic boundaries' and 'is predicated not on sameness but on connection and collaboration.'[409] Primordial forms of capitalist exchange, as well as social tensions emerge in the space of the camp to produce such an everyday cosmopolitanism:

> The camp was in some ways like a trading post in an old-time gold rush, and much was for sale or barter, from sweaters to mobile phones to antibiotics to, quietly, sex and drugs, and there were families with an eye on the future and gangs of young men with an eye on the vulnerable and upright folks and swindlers and those who had risked their lives to save their children and those who knew how to choke a man in the dark so he never made a sound. The island was pretty safe, they were told, except when it was not, which made it like most places. Decent people vastly outnumbered

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[407] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 100.
[408] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 100.
[409] Noble, 'Everyday Cosmopolitanism and the Labour of Intercultural Community', p. 55.

dangerous ones, but it was probably best to be in the camp, near other people, after nightfall.[410]

The camp as it emerges in Mykonos echoes Hardt and Negri's contention in *Empire* that where global power systems dominate institutional power is concentrated in global economic and socio-cultural institutions, at the same time as reflecting a globalised class of people.

In London, the camp emerges in a complex process of becoming. Nadia and Saeed emerge through a portal into a large home in an affluent part of London, so plush that they mistake it for a hotel. New portals open up in the house and, 'people began to emerge from the upstairs room where Nadia and Saeed had themselves first arrived: a dozen Nigerians, later a few Somalis, after them a family from the borderlands between Myanmar and Thailand. More and more and more.'[411] By the end of the weekend, citizens from the entire Global South are represented, 'from as far west as Guatemala and as far east as Indonesia.'[412] Reiterating 'togetherness in difference', the camp develops in luxury

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[410] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 100.
[411] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 119-120.
[412] Hamid, *Exit West*, pp. 123-124.

accommodation.[413] The appearance of a community of migrants in a house problematises the notion of the camp. When police arrive (although they are understood to be soldiers by Nadia and Saeed) they secure the perimeter of the house.[414] The emergence of the portals in houses and as homes introduces a permanent state of exception across the entire world, and Hamid emphasises that local to securitise the house to contain the migrants has the paradoxical effect of fomenting a heterogeneous community. 'A sort of camaraderie evolved as it might not have had they been on the street, in the open, for then they would likely have scattered, […] but here they were penned in together, and being penned in made them into a grouping, a group.'[415] The horror of the camp as a site of terror is opened up here as a space in which community formation can occur.

Hamid represents London as two cities demarcated by light and dark. One night, the electricity in an area where many migrants are gathered goes off and for Nadia and Saeed it echoes

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[413] Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West* (London: Routledge, 2001). See Noble, p. 63.
[414] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 124.
[415] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 124.

what was experienced in their country.[416] London is no longer designated by space or wealth but is coded in terms of dark and light. 'In dark London,' Hamid writes, 'rubbish accrued, uncollected, and underground stations were sealed. The trains kept running, skipping stops near Saeed and Nadia but felt as a rumble beneath their feet and heard at a low, powerful frequency, almost subsonic, like thunder or the detonation of a massive, distant bomb.'[417] In this landscape, London is indistinguishable from Nadia and Saeed's country where communication networks are removed and the landscape evoked as a war zone. Tensions between migrants and nativists in London come to the fore: 'The fury of those nativists advocating wholesale slaughter was what struck Nadia most, and it struck her because it seemed so familiar, so much like the fury of the militants in her own city.'[418] *Exit West* equates a set of power relations locally and globally as forces of violence and figures of peace, acknowledging the reproduction of the same violent actors in different spaces. In a former green belt space to which the migrants are eventually outsourced to build housing

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[416] Hamid, *Exit West*, pp. 139-141.
[417] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 142.
[418] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 156.

on the rim of London, for example, Nadia and Saeed still find themselves 'bounded by a perimeter fence.'[419]

The same totalitarian forms of exploitation as reproduced across different spatial contexts suggests the world as one. In this sense, *Exit West* is world literature. In Wendy Knepper's definition, 'a world literary text may gain new meaning as it is repoliticized within different yet comparable world contexts from which it originated.'[420] In Marin, a world is imagined entirely of migrants. Here, 'there were almost no natives,' Hamid writes, 'these people having died or been exterminated long ago and one would see them only occasionally, at impromptu trading posts – or perhaps more often, but wrapped in clothes and guises and behaviours and indistinguishable from anyone else.'[421] This eventuality suggests a utopian thinking where the world is equalised in terms of a spatial re-ordering, a view that is encouraged by the novel: 'That summer it seemed to Saeed and Nadia that the whole planet

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[419] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 168.

[420] Wendy Knepper, '"Another World Is Possible": Radicalizing World Literature via the Postcolonial', in *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Postcolonial Writing: New Contexts, New Narratives, New Debates* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 11-31.

[421] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 195.

was on the move, much of the global south headed to the global north, but also southerners moving to other southern places and northerners moving to other northern places.'[422] The world is in flux; borders, nation states, and national identities collapse. The Global North moves to the Global South. In *Exit West* global citizenship is compounded by choice and ultimate freedom. Against the idea of free market liberalism, where capital may move freely across borders but people cannot, Hamid suggests mobility and stasis predicated, in part at least, on individual choice, and the collapse of regulating structures for migrants suggests its communist potential.

As the novel closes, Saeed and Nadia separate, and Saeed's new partner in Marin begins to establish local forms of governance, 'a regional assembly for the Bay Area with members elected on the principle of one person one vote, regardless of where one came from.'[423] Citizenship and global hierarchies are dismantled but traditional citizenship models remain: 'How this assembly would coexist with other pre-existing bodies of government was as

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[422] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 167.
[423] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 219.

yet undecided'.[424] This development is suggestive of a transitionary moment between Hardt and Negri's system of Empire – dominated by the US and the world with institutions – and new, local forms of democratic participation. It signals, on the one hand, a carving out of the future, where a new world is imagined, and a yearning for utopia is imagined beyond markers of nationhood and citizenship. On the other hand, class differences are eliminated and a global proletariat may emerge for, as the novel puts it, 'everyone was foreign, and so, in a sense, no one was.'[425]

Transmission concludes with Arjun disappearing from the narrative altogether. It may be a celebratory moment, one in which the revolution in code has had the last laugh and the architect of the border securitisation project confronts and embraces the terrible situation he has created. But for Arjun, this ending is ostensibly unsatisfactory. Arjun must now spend the rest of his life as a terrorist, off-grid, unable to realise ambitions, or the social mobility inherent in his version of the American dream. Arjun's status is also necessarily removed – not by

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[424] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 219.
[425] Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 100.

the state, but by a need to avoid detention and is comparable to Nadia and Saeed's state of enforced and permanent global precarity. When he slips across the American-Mexican border, it mirrors the covert movement of the various iterations of Leela that he has produced, and resigns Arjun to lifelong refugeeism, his ambition thwarted. Instead, Arjun is now a global figure of resistance, a Ned Ludd of the 21st century, who is at once anonymous and mythic. 'One persistent report,' Kunzru writes, 'has a young man fitting [Arjun's] description accompanied by a South Asian woman of a similar age' who are sometimes seen 'kissing or holding hands.'[426] According to conspiracy theorists, there is only one possible explanation, only one pattern that makes sense.'[427] Leela and Arjun are now joined together as one in the mythology of him: the virus and Arjun are the same. By representing Arjun as both committed to meritocratic values and as a revolutionary subject, *Transmission* invites the reader to consider how 'revolutionary' politics may instead reflect a desire for relatively modest reforms so that material security can be guaranteed via a class war approach. In the

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[426] Kunzru, *Transmission*, p. 297.
[427] Kunzru, *Transmission*, p. 297.

next chapter, this theme of mobility continues and examines middle-class downward mobility in Jonathan Coe's *Number 11*.

Chapter Four

<u>'Let's go back to the very beginning': Reading</u>

<u>Austerity in *Number 11* (2015) by Jonathan Coe</u>

> Always, it is the poor people who pay. And always, it is the poor people's women who pay the most.
>
> David Mitchell, *Ghostwritten* (1999)
>
> you can never go back, and to make an idol of the past only disfigures the present and make the future harder to attain.
>
> Melissa Harrison, *All Among the Barley* (2018)

When George Osborne made his last conference speech as Shadow Chancellor in 2009, he outlined key economic tenets for how a Conservative government would address the stumbling fortunes of the British economy. The approach was underpinned by an 'unwavering commitment to fiscal responsibility as the root of economic stability', implying at once that fiscal irresponsibility had dominated New Labour's time in office and that this policy objective would deliver positive outcomes.[428] The proposals were modest: pensions were to be protected, but the pension age would be raised, and

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[428] George Osborne, 'We will lead the economy out of crisis', 6 October 2009, <https://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/601293> [accessed 17 June 2018].

women would now retire at the same age as men. Bankers, as public enemy number one, were not to funnel public money into private bonuses, and public sector pay would be frozen, meaning that 100,000 jobs could be saved. By asking pensioners, public sector workers, and bankers to moderate their behaviour, or – as it became idiomatic to say – 'tighten our belts', Osborne and the Conservative Party as part of its messaging strategy, made the case for a unified population wherein bankers, health care professionals and teachers, as well as the retired, were regarded as sharing the same interests in the face of economic catastrophe. Osborne, captured it in the mantra: 'we're all in this together.'[429]

'We' – in the face of this challenging national moment – comes to collectivise the taxpayer-citizen. The figure not included in this national collective is the mythic benefit scrounger, the unemployed villain at the centre of journalistic and popular cultural representation in the 1990s and 2000s. As considered in Chapter One, this figure was marked as making the wrong (and wasteful) consumer choices, indulging in immoral behaviour, and such actions constituting a

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[429] Osborne, 'We will lead the economy out of crisis'.

personal pathology.[430] Beverley Skeggs and Vik Loveday capture how the working classes are reproduced in this degenerate formulation:

> government rhetoric spreads through popular culture, generating a normative consensus through the repeated citation of symbolic figures that constitute the moral limit, produced through caricature and discourses of familial disorder and dysfunction, dangerous masculinities and dependent, fecund and excessive femininities, of antisocial behaviour, and moral and ecological decay.[431]

The working class was re-made by consumer culture, re-imagined by government rhetoric and in popular culture. Following the murder of James Bulger in 1993, a moral panic was sparked about single working-class mothers and the media hysteria which followed emerged in government rhetoric in parodic form when the 'Little List' speech saw Peter Lilley perform his own version of the song from *The*

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[430] Hayward and Yar, 'The "Chav" phenomenon: Consumption, media and the construction of a new underclass'; Imogen Tyler, 'Chav Scum Chav Mum: Class disgust in contemporary Britain', *Feminist Media Studies*, 8.1 (2008), 17-34; Jones, *Chavs*; Jock Young, 'Moral Panic: Its origins in resistance, ressentiment and the translation of fantasy into reality', *British Journal of Criminology*, 49.1 (2009), 4-16; Jock Young, Moral panics and the transgressive other', *Crime Media Culture*, 7.3 (2011), 245-258; Elias le Grand, Linking Moralisation to Class Identity: The Role of Ressentiment and Respectability in the Social Reaction to Chavs', *Sociological Research Online*, 20.4 (2015), 1-15; Matthew Adams and Jayne Raisborough, 'The self-control ethos and the "chav": Unpacking cultural representations of the white working class', *Culture & Psychology*, 17.1 (2011), 81-97.

[431] Beverley Skeggs and Vik Loveday, 'Struggles for value: value practices, injustice, judgment, affect, and the idea of class', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 63.3 (2012), 472-490 (p. 474).

Mikado.[432] In 2004, when 'chav' was announced as buzzword of the year, it was in large part to this term's embodiment in popular culture in the figure of Vicky Pollard, the chav character in David Walliams and Matt Lucas's television sketch show *Little Britain* (2003-2005). Indebted to the hysteria conjured by government rhetoric and tabloid newspapers, Vicky encapsulates many of the characteristics Skeggs and Loveday describe: dependent on welfare, giving birth to children with absent fathers, exhibiting antisocial and immoral behaviour, and expressing excessive traits of femininity and, in another context, masculinity. This figure is marked by poor consumer and life choices.

As the financial markets stumbled and the British economy entered a recession in 2008, this particular discourse of morality was recycled and put to use again. In one speech, David Cameron said: 'The age of irresponsibility is giving way to the age of austerity', implying consumer culture had a moral component and that a new moralism could be found

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[432] Peter Lilley, cited in Owen Jones, *Chavs*, p. 69. See also Kirk Mann and Sasha Roseneil, '"Some Mother Do 'Ave 'Em": backlash and the gender politics of the underclass debate', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 3.3 (1994), 317-331.

in austere ways of living.[433] Consumer culture's
perceived wastefulness was characterised as
immoral. Bound up with narratives of middle-class
sustainability practices, austerity in this light is
associated with ethical ways of living in the context
of environmental catastrophe. Bramall describes this
as 'austerity chic': 'In a context of economic
constraint and climate change,' Bramall writes,
'austerity chic describes the incorporation of a notion
of the necessity of reuse and recycling into a much
more familiar consumer-capitalist commitment to the
pursuit of that which is fashionable and new.'[434]
Consumerism is remade into an ethical and
environmentally friendly practice. The picture is
complicated because environmental protection is
situated alongside fiscal tightening and state
spending and redistributed affluence as
environmentally harmful. Although this claim
undoubtedly has something in it, working-class
consumer practices after the financial crisis, such as
increased participation in the market of fast fashion,

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[433] David Cameron, 'David Cameron: The age of austerity',
Conservative Party Speeches, 26 April 2009,
<https://conservative-
speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/601367> [accessed 17
June 2018].
[434] See Bramall, *The Cultural Politics of Austerity*, p. 23, pp. 21-
24.

were regarded as contributing to the environmental crisis.[435] Working-class subjects were framed as doubly immoral: by failing to manage personal budgets, they contribute to environmental destruction. This recycling of judgment against working-class subjects is important here because it represents a concerted attempt to attribute the financial and environmental crises to working-class consumer practices.

The financial crisis and the introduction of austerity measures also ushered in new forms of biopolitical control. Will Davies argues that the 'transfer of banking debts onto government balance sheets, creating the justification for austerity, has triggered a third phase of neoliberalism, which operates with an ethos of heavily moralized – as opposed to utilitarian – punishment'.[436] Beyond a set of fiscal principles, austerity is a set of punitive measures to regulate behaviours that are undesirable in relation to the moral citizen under neoliberalism and to undermine state provision of services. *Homo oeconomicus* embodies the desirable citizen who adheres to neoliberal tenets and value systems;

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[435] Elaine Graham-Leigh, *The Diet of Austerity: Class, Food, and Climate Change* (London: Zone Books, 2015).
[436] Davies, 'The New Neoliberalism', p. 130.

individuals who are reliant on state-run services and who lack the entrepreneurial spirit endemic to neoliberalism become the abject and are treated accordingly.[437] Proponents of austerity oppose value systems – such as state provision of services and welfarism – that counterpose the remaking of services under neoliberal models: 'The hope', Leo McCain writes, 'appears to be that the introduction of more market mechanisms, combined with the encouragement of private sector, non-profit, charity and social enterprises, will make vital services such as health, education, and social care.'[438] As such, a responsible, that is, a moral, citizen adopts neoliberalism's value systems of market competition and trust in the market's ability to manage better public services. Individual actors who fail to adopt this philosophy and do not adhere to these values are thus re-cast as immoral. What is striking about this mode of reason is its failure to account for social and cultural practices. A refusal to participate wilfully in this market logic, by claiming social security benefits and looking to state-funded mechanisms for support

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[437] Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*.

[438] Leo McCain, 'Reforming Public Services After The Crash: The Role of Framing and Hoping', *Public Administration*, 91.1 (2013), 5-16 (p. 9).

is regarded as immoral. Where narratives of illegitimate benefit claimants in the early 2000s were presented as representative, under this new phase of market logic, any access of state support is regarded as immoral.

It is this intensified form of neoliberalism that causes critics to say austerity that is 'political'.[439] James Meadway persuasively describes the mechanisms that trigger a period of austerity as originating in political decision making; otherwise, 'there's no mechanism for triggering austerity.'[440] John Clarke and Janet Newman argue vigorously that austerity is a politically motivated project. Austerity, they claim, 'has been ideologically reworked […] from an economic problem (how to "rescue" the banks and restore market stability) to a political problem (how to allocate blame and responsibility for this crisis).'[441] Economic rationality is rejected altogether, according to this argument. In its place, a neoliberal logic of biopolitics emerges. These viewpoints, however, overlook a critical element of

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[439] James Meadway in Rebecca Bramall, Jeremy Gilbert and James Meadway, 'What is Austerity?', *New Formations*, 87 (2016), 119-140 (p. 119).

[440] James Meadway in Bramall, Gilbert, and Meadway, 'What is Austerity?', p. 119.

[441] John Clarke and Janet Newman, 'The alchemy of austerity', *Critical Social Policy*, 32.3 (2012), 299-319 (p. 300).

austerity which is its centrality to neoliberalism. As David Harvey notes, it is easy to see how austerity is a primary operating function of neoliberalism. 'Deregulation, privatisation and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision have been all too common.'[442] As the Introduction outlined, in my reading, reducing the role of the state is essential if neoliberalism is to achieve its goal of frictionless market rule. Naming austerity, since its nominal emergence, as official policy of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition is to misunderstand the situation: austerity is fundamental to the way neoliberalism functions.

This chapter situates the tension between the salience placed on individual choice and biopolitical power to unpack the relationship between class subject and neoliberalism as it operates in Jonathan Coe's novel *Number 11*. Published in 2015, it focuses on it as an example of austerity fiction and builds on the critical context of the figure of the reviled working-class mother, the chav mother, under austerity, to argue that she is re-configured in the character of Val Doubleday. Val is framed as both the 'chav' mother and the middle-class figure of

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[442] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 3.

downward mobility. This novel's aesthetic suggests austerity is a repeated and circular experience, as in a cycle of poverty and a culturally retrospective and nostalgic experience.

The 'chav mother' and reality TV

Coe's *Number 11* focuses on four principle female characters. Rachel is the most central, and the novel follows her from childhood through education at the University of Oxford into the precarious labour market. Val and Alison are mother and daughter; in the early 2000s, Val has had a one hit wonder but has since taken a job at a local library, where her hours have been cut. The novel charts Val's gradual slide into poverty. Alison is an aspiring artist but is sent to jail for benefit fraud. Laura is a professor at the University of Oxford where Rachel and Laura meet. Laura is aware of her recently deceased husband's nostalgic obsessions with a film from his childhood which represents postwar affluence and the novel charts her trajectory from Oxford don to public-facing intellectual, with her research focusing on the value of cultural objects, histories, and events. Coe represents his characters as either victims of neoliberalism's fiscal consolidation and the reduction in state provision of key services, as actors in a

precariatised labour market, or as potential enablers, who are complicit in the ways in which neoliberal rationality 'disseminates the *model of the market* to all domains and activities'.[443] The other main character in the novel is a police constable – who solves crimes with the help of critical theory. His role is concerned with free speech and satire and ushers in an important theme for producing effective political critique, but this figure contributes less to the novel as an overarching example of austerity fiction.

Women are the central lens through which the financial crisis and austerity is viewed after the crash. 'Would it [the subprime mortgage crisis] have happened with more women on these boards?', Gillian Wilmot asks.[444] The answer she provides is a bold no: 'Not if those women had been in the powerful roles of executives, chief executives and chairmen at big financial institutions.'[445] Indeed, it has been argued that the cause of the crisis was too much testosterone, or 'men behaving badly'.[446]

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[443] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 31.

[444] Gillian Wilmott, 'Men have messed it up. Let women sort it out', *Financial Times*, 26 November 2008, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c7dcb27c-bbc3-11dd-80e9-0000779fd18c.html#axzz3r0rjrGLN> [accessed 9 November 2015].

[445] Wilmott, 'Men have messed it up. Let women sort it out'.

[446] Robert Peston, 'Why men are to blame for the crunch', *BBC*, 29 July 2009, https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/robertpeston/2009/0

According to such claims, 'fanatical warriors in Armani suits' revealed with dramatic effects the problem of too many men being responsible for the financial health of the world's developed nations.[447] As Iceland's response to the crisis showed, 'women are at the fore of the clean-up'.[448] This may risk essentialising women, but it does emphasise an important gendered dynamic of austerity as institutional violence.[449] Jane Pollard has argued persuasively that, although men felt the initial effects of the financial crisis (with jobs disappearing in manufacturing and in construction in the early days), after the financial crisis was in train, women bore the brunt.[450] In these circumstances, men continue to be regarded as '"legitimate" job holders, when jobs are scarce', and women more likely to be fired first.[451]

7/why_men_are_to_blame_for_the_c.html> [accessed 9 November 2015].

[447] Elizabeth Sherman, 'Women in Fantasy Land', *Washington Post*, 9 March 2009, <http://views.washingtonpost.com/leadership/panelists/2009/03/women-in-fantasy-land.html> [accessed 13 October 2015].

[448] Sutherland, 'After the crash, Iceland's women lead the rescue'.

[449] Vickie Cooper and David Whyte, 'Introduction' in *The Violence of Austerity*, ed. by Vickie Cooper and David Whyte (London: Pluto, 2017), pp. 1-34.

[450] Jane Pollard, 'Gendering capital: Financial crisis, financialization, and (an agenda for) economic geography', *Progress in Human Geography*, 37.3 (2012), 403-423 (p. 408).

[451] Pollard, 'Gendering capital: Financial crisis, financialization, and (an agenda for) economic geography', p. 408. See also Sutherland, 'After the crash, Iceland's women lead the rescue'.

Pollard details how employers reacted to 'deteriorating economic conditions' by using the financial crisis as cover 'to reduce wages and/or hours, cut or delay the payment of bonuses, reduce other benefits or relocate and reopen factories with a migrant labour force less knowledgeable about their rights'.[452] Pollard is also one of the cultural commentators who notes 'middle-aged women who are bearing the brunt of job losses', and that in the UK, this group saw the pension age increase against historic promises.[453] Given this sexist dynamic to consolidation in the post-crash context, women may be regarded as the subjects most vulnerable to financial crises in both class and gendered terms, and *Number 11* speaks to this concern.

Coe separates his novel into five parts, and the second of these is entitled 'The Comeback.' 'The Comeback' charts the miserable experience of Val Doubleday as she slips into poverty because of austerity. Val is the sole parent of a teenage daughter and works at a local library, but over the course of the

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[452] Pollard, 'Gendering capital: Financial crisis, financialization, and (an agenda for) economic geography', p. 408.
[453] Pollard, 'Gendering capital: Financial crisis, financialization, and (an agenda for) economic geography', p. 409.

novel, Val's hours are steadily reduced from four days to three mornings a week. At home, the heating is used less and less and when it is turned on, it is on very low. To keep warm, Val rides the No. 11 bus, which orbits Birmingham's outer-circle route. On one of her journeys, Val reflects on economic developments and political changes since the financial crisis began and, via Val, Coe provides an overview of what has occurred since the early days of the recession and offers an understanding of austerity as an emergent term:

> This new buzzword – austerity – had only entered common currency about a year ago. What did it mean? In 2008 there had been a global financial crisis and some of the world's largest banks had been on the point of collapse. The people had bailed them out and now, it seemed, in order to pay for this, public services would have to be slashed and benefits would have to be cut. But it was worth it because we had been living beyond our means and 'we were all in this together'. […] And this, essentially, was why Val was now being careful never to turn her radiators up higher than 2 and was choosing to ride the Number 11 bus rather than go home to her chilly living room. But at the same time, she couldn't help thinking about the traders and hedge fund managers whose activities had brought the banks to the brink of collapse: were many of them, she wondered being careful to keep their radiators turned down to 2? It didn't seem very likely.[454]

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[454] Jonathan Coe, *Number 11* (London: Viking, 2015), pp. 89-90.

Coe's account of the economic and financial challenges the British economy faced in 2008 emphasises the key responses by central government, resulting in cuts to public services, including social security benefits. The consequences of these actions are, in turn, mapped onto Val's experience and reduction of the standard of living she enjoys. Val is a character-driven case study for what effects austerity has on individuals who are, or who become, reliant on provision provided by the state. Moreover, the tone suggests a leftist critique of austerity. The use of 'it seemed' undermines the rest of passage. Likewise, Osborne's mantra is called into question by a gentle scepticism that the nation's financial leaders were not required to deal with budget tightening measures that Val herself experiences. Val identifies hedge fund managers as the culprits of the crisis and wonders whether punishment has been allocated and enforced by the government. The novel directs public suspicion towards narratives of austerity as a necessary set of fiscal policies and reframes austerity, and its experience via an individual suffering under it from a class perspective.

It is during Val's journeys on the number eleven that Val ponders the political context for her

own experience. Several issues – all relating to austerity – reverberate in her thoughts: the library 'couldn't afford to pay her properly. Because the government had drastically reduced its budget for libraries'. She questions whether 'the traders and fund managers whose activities had brought the banks to the brink of collapse' were 'being careful to keep their radiators turned down to 2?' and conjectures whether 'she should stay on [the bus] for another circuit.' But even Val realizes that 'would be a step too far.'[455] Val posits what living under austerity feels like and the consequences of austerity on an individual level. In a fictionalised history of austerity for the individual citizen.

Val has a strong class consciousness but she inhabits an ambiguous class identity. Upon returning home from food shopping, Val and her daughter Alison argue over carrots. Alison identifies the carrots Val has bought as 'not organic', a clear departure from the family's usual consumer habits, it appears.[456] In this way, the text nods to Val and Alison as middle-class consumers, aware of safer ways of eating. But Val's response is an indication of

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[455] Coe, *Number 11*, pp. 89-90.
[456] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 72.

a more complicated cultural and class identity in this moment: 'They cost half the price,' she announces, 'so that's what we're going to be eating from now on. You'd better get used to it.'[457] Val has made a change in her consumer spending habits, selecting cheaper vegetables to adjust to a new frugality as a good neoliberal subject living within her means. An argument erupts when it emerges Val has saved money on carrots to pay for alcohol: '"Four bottles? Really?'' said Alison, lifting out one bottle of Pinot Grigio after another. "They were 50p off," said Val. "Oh I see, so by getting four of them you've saved even more money."'[458] Alison's indignation reveals the extent to which Val fails to perform her new neoliberal subjecthood effectively: '"It just seems silly to be saving money on vegetables when you're wasting it on wine."'[459] Val emerges as a subject making the wrong consumer choices, privileging pleasure over health. For Elaine Graham-Leigh, an argument that maintains legitimacy is the one that 'criticises working-class people for consumer consumption […] either for wasting their dole money on wide-screen TVs and Sky subscriptions', at the

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[457] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 72.

[458] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 72.

[459] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 73.

same time as asserting 'that if they can find the resources to acquire TVs and PlayStations, they can't really be poor.'[460] Delegitimising poverty by reference to consumerism plays a significant role in constructing working-class mothers as 'chav' or 'bad' mothers, but for Val the picture is somewhat more complicated. She is in the process of downgrading her class status because of the consumer choices she is now making; as the argument Val has with Alison intimates, these consumer habits are a recent development.

Val is also presented in relation to a longer cultural history of failing working-class mothers. For example, Val seeks Alison's approval to invite Steve – a former boyfriend with unreliable credentials – over for dinner. Alison's reluctance to give an opinion on the matter masquerades a resentment for a person Val claims 'was practically your stepfather for a while.'[461] Alison's characterisation is less cosy: '"He was the bloke you… shacked up with, for a few months"'.[462] She is more scathing when she describes him as '"the bloke you met on holiday and then changed cities to come and live with, and got dumped

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[460] Graham-Leigh, *The Diet of Austerity*, pp. 82-83.
[461] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 73.
[462] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 73.

by as soon as life started to get difficult.'"[463] By suggesting Val's bad choice in men, she emerges through a stereotype of a failed mother for having multiple, and unreliable, partners, characterised in the way Stephanie Lawler describes 'as bad neglectful mothers, oversexualised and with the "wrong" kind of relations to men.'[464] For Imogen Tyler, such a figure is the 'chav mum.' According to Tyler, this figure is white and working-class and embodies a 'dirty' or 'contaminated whiteness'.[465] These members of the white working class are rendered illegitimately white, she claims, differentiating these subjects from the supposedly 'respectable whiteness' of middle-class cosmopolitans.[466] Val is coded in these terms owing to her – for Alison at least – bad choice in men, bad decision-making in relation to them, and as a style of single parent of an illegitimate, mixed-race child, which according to moral panic narratives, construes Val as abject.

By the novel's close, when Alison is in jail, her status seems to confirm the image of Val as a 'bad'

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[463] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 73.

[464] Steph Lawler, 'Mobs and Monsters: *Independent* man meets Paulsgrove women', *Feminist Theory*, 3.1 (2002), 103-113, (p. 109).

[465] Imogen Tyler, 'Chav Mum Chav Scum', pp. 25-26.

[466] Imogen Tyler, 'Chav Mum Chav Scum', pp. 25-26.

mother who raises 'supposedly dysfunctional children', who 'signal a moral degeneracy that stems from individual choices and lifestyles.'[467] Alison is a 'benefits cheat'. She has claimed Disability Living Allowance from the earliest opportunity on the account of her prosthetic leg and 'in addition to the Housing Benefit she receives for the bijou three-bedroom house she shares with her lesbian lover'.[468] This announcement is made in an article a predatory journalist writes about Alison, and according to the article, neither Alison nor her partner Selena work, 'Both of them claim Jobseeker's Allowance' despite the fact that 'Alison already has a job' as 'a self-styled "artist"'.[469] The article also establishes Val as a dysfunctional mother and serves to mobilise the racist, homophobic, and ableist tropes interrogated in the novel's precursor, *What A Carve Up!*

Alison's appearance in the newspaper article is motivated by a journalist's bruised ego. Josephine Winshaw-Eaves, daughter of the slaughtered Hilary, a character in *What A Carve Up!*, channels her mother's lust for producing such caricatures by

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[467] Adams and Raisborough, 'The self-control ethos and the "chav": Unpacking cultural representations of the white working class', p. 89.

[468] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 291.

[469] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 291.

reviving Hilary's infamous 'black one-legged lesbian on benefits' piece for the twenty-first century. Her father, Sir Peter, is the paper's editor and proprietor and scolds her: '"You fucked up your argument in the last few paragraphs"', he tells her; '"A black one-legged lesbian on benefits? Even our readers know there's no such thing. They're only worried about Muslims these days."'[470] In the loaded, incendiary language of the tabloid press, a dichotomy is established between the threat of the 'terrorist' and the threat of the 'benefits scrounger'. This dressing down 'gnawed at her soul' and left her 'stung' and to atone, Josephine writes the article that lands Alison in jail – 'Black disabled lesbian on benefits is actually black, disabled lesbian benefits *cheat*'.[471] In mimicking her mother's journalistic style, she perpetuates tabloid stereotypes in a new context. *Number 11* points to the re-appearance of such politically motivated attacks, and the recirculation of a right-wing identity politics. Critically, Alison's fate, incarcerated for benefit fraud, transpires because of a familial squabble, troubling the presentation of benefit fraud in the post-2008 context, and more

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[470] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 195.
[471] Coe, *Number 11*, pp. 195-196, p. 291.

Richard Bromhall; N0381003

significantly, sympathetically presents the chav mother and her children not as failed citizens but as victims of a malicious ruling class.

But it is the preoccupation with Val as a reality TV star in this section that at once confirms her status as a chav mother and announces the ways in which structural inequality both produces and entrenches austerity. Coe himself acknowledges the relationship between the extremes of emphatic wealth and the misery of poverty, as well as emergent forms of technology when he says: '*Number 11* is a satire on greed, inequality, social media, reality TV' and 'a fierce satire on social justice.'[472] The novel establishes a relationship between new media forms and structural inequality under neoliberalism. Bringing together a knot of thematic strands, *Number 11* articulates structural power through a familiar, albeit unnamed, reality TV show, a show 'in which a dozen celebrities were flown off to the Australian jungle and had to survive there for two weeks, while the viewing public voted them off the programme one by one.'[473] The programme's 'two chortling hosts'makes it clear that this is an explicit parody of

[472] Jonathan Coe in Vanessa Guignery, *Jonathan Coe* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), pp. 146-147.
[473] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 91.

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ITV's long-running reality show, *I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out of Here.*[474]

This is a show that promises implicitly to revive Val's music career: 'It wasn't long before they found themselves shrieking with excitement, and dancing together around the room' until Val and Alison collapse 'on to the sofa in a heap, tears of joy running down their faces.'[475] The hope such a platform promises could be the transformation of Val's life from poverty to a lucrative pop career. There is no question that this is the ambition: Val's goal is 'to make sure that she got to sing "Sink and Swim" to the show's ten million viewers'.[476] If realised, it could result in the record deal she craves and that she has identified as the means to escape the economic misery in which she exists. This attempt to garner public approval relies on Val's ability to mobilise her cultural capital; she must 'be herself' to ensure that 'everyone will like you', Alison advises.[477] Val's success hinges on her ability to mobilise certain neoliberal modes of human and cultural capital to exploit the context and deliver the

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[474] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 103.
[475] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 92.
[476] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 93.
[477] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 93.

success it promises. This aspirational narrative of upward mobility is individualised and personalised: the question of structural change is never raised.

Such promises are, for Coe's regular reader at least, dashed by the spectral presence of the Winshaws. The Winshaw siblings represent different aspects of neoliberal power in 1980s Britain and are all killed off in amusing and dramatic fashion at the end of *What A Carve Up!* Their casual re-appearance in *Number 11* suggests the work they started survives. When meeting the production company, Stercus Television, Val is taken to the 'Hilary Winshaw Suite […] named after the legendary executive who joined the company in the early 1990s and transformed its fortunes by taking it in its present cost-efficient, populist direction, with 90 per cent of its output in the field of reality shows.'[478] Pushing the production company towards cheaper programming with more widespread appeal reflects the trend towards reality television and attaches neoliberal systems of value to the show in which Val participates. In fiction, Coe harnesses what Chad Raphael has defined as key

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[478] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 94.

developments in television programming in the twenty-first century.[479]

This cost-efficient, populist TV format is a neoliberal cultural product because of its emergence in a period of budget cuts and a form that guarantees profit with minimal investment. It also serves as a metaphor for structural exclusion and violence. One scene shows Val interacting with the show's anticipated winner, Danielle, and reflects the quotidian banality of conversations between strangers:

> Val: For me, [entering the camp late] was a bit of an anti-climax, after the helicopter and everything.
> Danielle: A bit of a damp squid, yeah…
> Val: (*after a beat*) Squib, you mean.
> Danielle: What?
> Val: That's the expression – 'damp squib'.
> Danielle: Oh, I see. So you're correcting me?
> Val: Well, a lot of people get it wrong.
> Danielle: I thought it was 'squid' because, you know, squids live underwater, so they're probably quite damp.
> Val: Yes, you'd think so. But it's actually squib.
> Danielle: Oh. OK. (*a beat*) Well, thanks for putting me right about that.[480]

This seemingly uneventful moment in the camp seems unworthy of the programme's final cut. An

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[479] See Chad Raphael, 'The political-economic origins of Reali-TV', in *Reality TV: remaking television culture*, ed. by Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004), pp. 123-140.
[480] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 101.

unimportant grammatical mistake is made, and a correction offered; it conveys a scene like many others in everyday life but might provide an example of what Philip Tew has claimed is the novel's difficulty and its refusal to commit to a genre. Tew argues that while 'various lives intersect intermittently', Coe's 'portrayal of human interaction involves an aspect that cannot fully be understood or defined thematically'; it is 'precisely why the text focuses on life's minutiae, offering a multiplicity of ordinary lives, detailing myriad exchanges, conversations and associated reflections upon apparently inconsequential matters.'[481] A text in flux, *Number 11* allows for what seems insignificant detail is the novel's defining characteristic.

It is in the novel's commitment to emphasising mundane exchange and the inclusion of the show's editorial choices, the '*beat*', that the drama of the scene is enhanced. In the eyes of the public, this scene constitutes Val as a '**grammar nazi**', a '**fucking bitch**', and produces a desire that Val will '**die of cancer**'.[482] Such extreme responses are the result of an engineered reality contrived by the

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[481] Tew, 'Neogothic Minutiae and Mundanity in Jonathan Coe's *Number 11*', p. 191.

[482] Coe, *Number 11*, pp. 109-110. Bold in the original.

show's editorial team. Although these events undoubtedly occur, they are emphasised as significant over a twenty-four-hour period and serve to constitute Val not as she hopes to appear, as 'friendly, caring and protective, offering advice and wisdom as well as companionship' but as 'a witch', 'a bitch from hell', a 'cunt', and a 'big cunt bully'.[483] Indeed, this skewered reality makes Val unrecognisable even to her own daughter.

> [Alison] knew her mother intimately: better – far better – than she knew anyone else in the world. And the woman on the television had recognizably been her mother. And yet, in the very occasional glimpses of her which the programme had afforded, it had also been like watching a stranger. She had seen her as the cameras had seen her, and these perspectives, she thought, were unforgiving. They were unfiltered by love.[484]

Coe's novel calls into question the reality presented on reality television. It is juxtaposed with the personal relationship to which Alison can lay claim. But the show's editors and its editorial choices hold an incredible power over Val's short- and long-term fate and it is in this moment that the novel's realist credentials allow for the politics of this message to be accentuated.

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[483] Coe *Number 11*, p. 98.
[484] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 102.

Coe's novel not only involves the construct of figures of austerity who appear in such a light, but shows that figures of austerity's narratives are also silenced. Val's ambition to sing 'Sink and Swim' to the camp is eventually realised, and by the end, 'campmates began to applaud, slowly and feelingly, and when the applause had died down, they hugged Val, and kissed her, and told her how beautiful her song was'.[485] In a moment full of promise, it might be countenanced that Val's ambition – despite the structural obstacles in her path – will finally be realised. Consistent with the presentation of the reality TV show as replicating structural inequality and restrictions to access, however, Val's performance is omitted from the final cut. The 'happiest moment of her life' is substituted for a poor rendition of 'Yellow Submarine' by Danielle and Pete as an allusion of their relationship.[486] Val's aspiration to mobilise this platform for publicity to secure a recording contract never materialises because her performance is obfuscated, shelved in favour of the production company's preferred narrative. Reality TV is symbolic of structural

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[485] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 114.
[486] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 115.

barriers that Val faces as a subject of austerity; such subjects, the novel shows, are constructed by a pre-determined narrative.

Structural barriers to neoliberal ethics are not the only way in which austerity is articulated in *Number 11*. Austerity is presented as a punishing principle that manifests through the 'task' that Val is compelled to perform in the camp. This task sees Val crawl through a narrow aperture in a rock' with 'just about room for a human being to crawl through it'.[487] This hole is packed with 'the old creepy-crawlies' with 'cockroaches' and 'spiders' that join Val in the pit.[488] A routine element of this television programme, the task punishes the victim deemed least popular by the public and forces them to take part in an excruciating trial to redeem his or herself through an act of valour that is the successful completion of the task and consequent winning of food for the camp. The trial is an apt metaphor for austerity in Britain, where benefits are only granted by completing successfully 'work capability assessments.' These assessments, as Imogen Tyler notes, were introduced in 2008, as an austerity-driven

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[487] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 120.
[488] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 121.

reform, which sought to outsource government spending on the regulation of disability benefit claimants.[489] If the assessment is passed, the benefit is awarded to the hopeful applicant. Val suffers from various mental health conditions – 'claustrophobia', 'nyctophobia', 'entomophobia' – and the effects of her participation in this task are deleterious to her.[490] Upon being voted out, Val 'looked tired and skeletal. Her eyes were blank with shock and exhaustion. Her skin was grey'.[491] More, long-term consequences haunt her in Birmingham, after her return to Britain. 'No sleep again last night', she ponders, 'Not a wink. This [Number 11 bus] seems to be the only place you can sleep now. But you don't want to. As soon as you sleep, you hear them again. Feel them crawling. Up your legs, inside your trouser, down the front of your shirt.'[492] Val's participation in the TV show reduces her quality of life further as her mental health plummets after taking part.

Vickie Cooper and David Whyte's use of the term 'Institutional violence' is as 'a form of violence that can be understood as a means of force which is

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[489] Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, p, 207, pp. 207-208. See also Michael Adler, *Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment? Benefit Sanctions in the UK* (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2018).
[490] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 121.
[491] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 122.
[492] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 124.

not simply acted upon, but organised and administered through *legitimate* means'.[493] 'The violence of austerity' refers to the institutional mechanisms, like state authorisation of cuts in public spending regarded as responsible for the effects such policies have on the disabled, particularly the working classes. The popular cultural form, marked by a neoliberal economic model designed to maximise a sizable return on low investment is somewhat different to the context Cooper and Whyte describe but the reality TV show operates as a metaphor for processes of austerity. Its format is set up to mirror democratic institutions, with the contestants as subjects of austerity. When the result of the vote arrives, and the person is selected, she must complete the task to obtain food for her community. Coe highlights in parodic style how the reality TV show reflects the mechanisms of the state, and can be seen as participating in 'institutional violence'. Val's nomination to the trial with insects is both a form of punishment and legitimate process according to the show's rules. It is a task, characterised by personal humiliation for the purpose

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[493] Vickie Cooper and David Whyte, 'Introduction', in *The Violence of Austerity* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), pp. 1-31 (p. 23). Italics in the original.

of obtaining sustenance in the same way that 'capability assessments' force claimants to perform tasks to guarantee benefit payments.

In *Number 11*, however, it is not only institutional violence of which Val is a victim. Val experiences inter-personal violence from the public on her return to Birmingham. When she returns to the circular rhythm of the number eleven, she recalls the verbal abuse on her Twitter account on return from the jungle: '*Hope you get VD. Alison was right. You deserved to be raped. You shouldn't have looked. Can't get rid of words like that.*'[494] Such attacks have an indelible quality that is as psychologically damaging for Val as the experience she endured during the trials. Val's section of the novel closes on an elderly woman who Val attempts to help with a mobility trolley, barking: '"Why don't you piss off back to the jungle where you belong?"'[495] The reality TV show pre-empts the online abuse now translated into Val's quotidian experience. As Cooper and Whyte note, 'we need to see violence not as "exceptional" or "unusual" events but "ordinary" and "mundane" processes that routinely and over time

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[494] Coe, *Number* 11, p. 124.
[495] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 125.

deteriorate our mental and physical health.'[496]. Val is traumatised because the structural violence the TV show enabled constructed a narrative of her (and benefit claimants) as lacking good moral character, which in turn limits her ability to escape the situation, as her continual circling on the Number 11 bus expenses. This particular comment by the stranger, while evoking the TV show in which she has recently participated is grounded in a long-established racist trope. The novel, therefore, raises questions about what this means for individuals berated in this way. It may also refer to Val's status as a chav mother, coded by 'a dirty whiteness'.[497] Val's status is unaltered by way of participating in the show – for the purposes of aspiration – but is arguably also made worse because of it.

Austerity and Nostalgia

When global financial markets stumbled in 2007, Prime Minister Gordon Brown suggested Britons would need to draw on the Blitz spirit – the 'calm, determined British spirit'.[498] The period following

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[496] Cooper and Whyte, 'Introduction', pp. 23-24.

[497] Tyler, 'Chav scum chav mum', p. 25.

[498] Jean Eaglesham, 'Brown hails blitz spirit as way ahead', *Financial Times*, 12 October 2008, https://www.ft.com/content/2e3d97d8-98a7-11dd-ace3-000077b07658> [accessed 12 March 2018].

the financial crisis is marked by nostalgia for the Second World War and post-war period known as 'Austerity Britain'. In cultural terms, this nostalgic sense was harnessed to cultural and political events: the financial crisis itself, as Brown's comment attests but also the London Olympic Games and its opening ceremony, which evoked a celebration of postwar culture, and implicitly now of Brexit, through its explicit and politically affective evocation of the Second World War. Contemporary austerity in Britain is bound up with a nostalgic aesthetics attached to 'Austerity Britain' that is largely understood as two overlapping yet distinct periods in British history.[499] Reference to Austerity Britain refers to the period 1939-1954 to include rationing because it evokes a set of economic, social and cultural values and aesthetics, what Rebecca Bramall terms 'austerity culture'. More specifically, 'austerity culture' refers to 'historically informed practices, discourses, values, ideological elements, and representational strategies that arise in the new "age of austerity".'[500] Aesthetics from Austerity Britain are continually re-invoked in contemporary culture,

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[499] Bramall, *The Cultural Politics of Austerity*, p. 3.
[500] Bramall, *The Cultural Politics of Austerity*, p. 4.

in magazines, recipe books, advertising, retail spaces, exhibitions, television programmes. Austerity culture emerges – or re-emerges – as an aesthetic, and has dominated the decade, with Keep Calm and Carry On posters emphasising the trend. Created originally in 1939 in the event of a Nazi invasion of Britain, these posters were revived in the moment of the 2008 financial crisis. This poster – and the cultural moment it represents – is a call to conjure an imagined will and determined spirit, required then to resist Nazi invasion and applied now to the contemporary experience of financial disaster and fiscal tightening.

Evoking this stoic spirit and mapping it onto contemporary experience produces and enforces the need to draw on a collective cultural memorythat has little to do with individual experience, except for a group of older Britons. For the most part, it is constructed as family narratives, shared reminiscence, and through culture – films, television, novels, computer games. As cultural memory, it plays out – as the Keep Calm and Carry On posters attest – as affective experiences of World War II and British resolve – defiance, certainty, national pride –

and harnesses a similar spirit to a contemporary context.[501]

In this new context, Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn have introduced the 1970s into the rich body of work on austerity, extending focus on Austerity Britain, and revealing counterpoints. In contrast to the positive cultural memory of Austerity Britain, the 1970s as evoked by the media and by politicians, in the immediate years after the crisis, acted 'as a warning to citizens against undertaking industrial action' and 'that this message was dependent on depicting organised labour as an outmoded and dangerous form of class politics which belonged to an earlier, more divisive era.'[502] As Biressi and Nunn demonstrate, newspaper column inches were devoted to emphasising the pitfalls relating to class politics. This tendency has intensified with Jeremy Corbyn and 'Corbynism's' surprising emergence since 2015.[503] The 1970s lacks the positive cultural

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[501] Robert Eaglestone, 'Cruel Nostalgia and the memory of WWII', *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. by Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 92-104 (p. 96, p. 102).

[502] Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, *Class and Contemporary British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 171.

[503] Emily Robinson, Camilla Shofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Natalie Thomlinson, 'Telling Stories about Post-war Britain: Popular Individualism and the Crisis of the 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28.2 (2017), 268-304 (p. 269).

memories of Austerity Britain, with appeals to both the political left and right, in terms of a civic nationalism, and reforms to the welfare state including the introduction of the National Health Service, the social housing programme, and social security benefits.[504]

This sense of the past as embodying collective and cultural memories is a key concern in *Number 11* and across Coe's oeuvre where he privileges marginal 'B' movies as textual referents, and serves to acknowledge a backward-looking tendency in British cultural life in the present moment of austerity. Coe's favoured cultural object is 'British popular films of the 1940s to the 1970s' and in *Number 11* film serves as a metaphor for a nostalgic impulse.[505] The character of Roger encapsulates this. He owns many magazines and obscure films from the postwar years, but after his sudden and tragic death,

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[504] This overwhelming focus on class politics has overshadowed the preoccupation with democratic contests, on the one hand. In the 2010s, three general elections took place, with four different Prime Ministers, and the 1970s saw three different premiers, elected during four general elections. More, the referendum on European Union membership in 1975 mirrors the vote taken in 2016, as well as two other referenda – the vote on the Alternative Vote in 2011, and the referendum on Scottish Independence in 2014. These political events contribute to an impression – arguably – of an insurgent preoccupation with class politics.

[505] Vanessa Guignery, 'Gothic Horror and Haunting Processes in Jonathan Coe's *Number 11*', in *Jonathan Coe: Contemporary British Satire*, ed. by Philip Tew (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 169-183 (p. 170).

his wife Laura's hope that 'one day' he would 'turn all this obscure knowledge into some great book, some academic masterpiece' is lost.[506] Instead, these cached items reflect 'something as simple as… nostalgia.'[507] Roger's academic work, intellectual pursuits, and cultural interests are motivated by a fascination with his own – and the nation's – cultural history and *Number 11* is littered with references to films and their directors, but one film in particular serves as the focal point for the novel, and comes to reflect a powerfully seductive nostalgic object: The *Crystal Garden*. The fountain in Roger and Laura's garden triggers a memory for Roger from childhood. Beholding the fountain for the first time, Laura recalls: 'I could feel him squeezing my hand. Squeezing it so tightly that it was actually hurting.'[508] Roger is possessed by this object, to the extent of losing some of his mental and physical capacities. Laura identifies 'this look in his eye that [she'd] never seen before', that 'rather scared [her]. 'I could tell', Laura thinks, 'that some weird powerful emotion had come over him.'[509] Roger is hypnotised

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506 Coe, *Number 11*, p. 152.
507 Coe, *Number 11*, p. 152.
508 Coe, *Number 11*, p. 153.
509 Coe, *Number 11*, p. 153.

by the fountain, and 'in little more than a whisper', utters the name of the film that he is reminded of by this fountain: '"*The Crystal Garden*"', a lost short film that he remembers.[510]

Coe is less interested in plot and narrative of *The Crystal Garden* but in the affective experience of the postwar period. Roger 'can only remember… an atmosphere, a feeling' of the film, a sentiment reaffirmed moments later: 'I can't remember *anything* about the story. Nothing at all. Like I said, the whole thing is just… just an *atmosphere*, and the strange thing is, that the atmosphere of the film sort of … bleeds in to the atmosphere in the room when I was watching it.'[511]

This scene evokes how nostalgia is characterised as 'a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed'.[512] Svetlana Boym examines this sense of nostalgia in and as cinema:

> Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images

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[510] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 153.

[511] Coe, *Number 11*, pp. 155-156. Italics in Coe.

[512] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. xiii.

– of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life.[513]

This scene collapses an object, the fountain into a cultural object and associated memories. As is characteristic with Coe's literary work, the question of genre is moved to the forefront whereby a novel presents a filmic moment. As revealed cumulatively from Roger's childhood, he had spent a day at home and happened upon a screening of a German film *The Crystal Garden* Coe creates a sense of 'double exposure', the 'superimposition of two images' in the form of the doubled image of the fountain in Laura and Roger's garden and the fountain in the film, but, as Laura explains to Rachel, the obsession Roger develops announces Roger as a character mourning a lost past made real again by a cultural object and memory. It is Roger's self-indulgent desire to recover the film – to watch its scenes again – that registers as a nostalgic impulse.

This is the moment of postwar Britain, the moment of social democracy: 'For Roger, it was about welfarism, and having a safety net, and above all… not being so weighed down by *choice* all the time, I suppose. He *hated* choice'.[514] *Number 11*

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[513] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. xiii-xiv.
[514] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 176. Italics in the original.

situates choice as burdensome for how it encumbers individuals with the onerous task of making decisions, a responsibility, the text suggests, also incumbent on governmental institutions.[515] Choice is positioned as a counterpoint to social-democratic values. But Roger's fascination with *The Crystal Garden* is also suggestive of the connection between cultural memory and subjective political memory: '"It was to do with what the country was like – or what he *thought* it had been like – in the sixties and seventies."'[516] Roger's obsessive approach to recovering the film and watching it again is predicated on an affective experience of postwar class politics that echoes Walter Benjamin's 'left melancholy', here a yearning for postwar social democracy. Left melancholy is Benjamin's 'unambivalent epithet for the revolutionary hack who is, finally, attached more to a particular political analysis or ideal – even to the failure of that ideal – than to seizing possibilities for radical change in the present.'[517] Wendy Brown's rearticulation of 'left melancholy' emerged at the end of the 1990s, a

[515] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 176.

[516] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 176.

[517] Wendy Brown, 'Resisting Left Melancholia', *Boundary 2*, 26.3 (1999), 19-27 (p. 20). Italics in the original.

period in which class politics, identity and experience were hopelessly abandoned in the wake of liberal capitalist democracy's triumphalist victory in the early 1990s, with the view that alternatives to capitalism were no longer possible. Roger's obsession with a postwar past is at once a nostalgic impulse for his childhood and a nostalgia for a perceived view of welfarism situated within the frame of left defeat and acquiescence.

Despite this clamouring for social democracy, *Number 11* warns against a return to welfarism in two ways. Roger's desire for this form of class politics also suggests a yearning for the social relations that accompanied it. '"Everything about the memory of watching that film"', Laura describes, '"Waiting for his father to come home from work – from the same place he worked for forty years"' with his '"mother in the kitchen, cooking dinner – the same dinner she always cooked on that night of the week. Can't you see how secure that must have felt?'[518] This moment, as Laura understands it, is characterised by economic and social security and makes for a reassuring childhood. Rachel remarks: 'It seems… a bit naïve', and the sentiment is confirmed by Laura: '"It is.

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[518] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 176.

Life's not like that. Life gets less and less like that all the time."'[519] Laura and Rachel seem to have accepted neoliberalism's slow and sustained undoing of the social and political arrangements to which Roger returns in his memories this desire to escape the contemporary moment is situated in the novel as a response to acceptance of neoliberal economic and cultural principles. Laura and Rachel are clearer about the neoliberal situation and Coe intimates that Roger's fascination with the past can have within it a moment in which male security was guaranteed by labourism. Laura participates in the work of neoliberal value production by attempting to quantify the unquantifiable – 'Feelings, in other words', she says.[520] Working as a public intellectual, as well as completing academic work on the subject, she focuses opportunities to explore in neoliberal forms of labour, while Rachel becomes a nanny for a superrich family in London – the Gunns, a long-standing situation for women in a feminised labour market.

Roger's lament for postwar welfarism invokes nostalgia for middle-class security, which is

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[519] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 177.
[520] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 259.

found in the setting of the middle-class garden. The garden operates as a metaphor for middle-class cultural memory. Although the garden and rural space have particular connotations of working-class experience, not least in terms of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century labouring class poets, of which John Clare is a notable example, the description of the garden in Coe's text codes it within the literary and cultural histories of middle-class gardens.[521] 'It was all here': 'the spreading cedar tree, which just cried out for a tree house to be built amidst the cluster of its lower branches'; 'the shallow stream at the edge of the lawn, traversed by a footbridge, ideal for those long Sunday afternoon games of Pooh-sticks'; 'the ramshackle shed which could, without too much effort or imagination, be converted into the makeshift headquarters of a junior detective club'; and of course, 'that fountain, looking a little derelict and melancholy now, but otherwise the perfect centrepiece of a garden which felt eerily like a stage of a film set, on which idealized vignettes of a middle-class childhood were designed to be acted out.'[522] The garden captures an experience of a secure

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[521] See Lisa McKenzie, *Getting By: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain* (Bristol, Policy, 2015), p. 23.
[522] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 144.

middle-class childhood, portrayed in early- and mid-twentieth century literary works such as Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) and Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958).[523] It is offset by Rachel's ability to demarcate the garden as a culturally produced imaginary and a functional site of working-class lived experience. This scene distinguishes between a middle-class cultural memory of the English past and compares working-class life.

As well as being in the rurally situated space of Didcot, this garden belongs to another time: 'it wasn't just a question of distance', Rachel felt, 'somehow, that in the last hour she had made a long journey through time, back to some far-off, half-forgotten era in her early life. To her childhood, even?'[524] Rachel soon realises, however, that the image does not evoke *her* humble origins but rather an image from middle-class literary culture: 'this garden certainly bore no resemblance to her mother's cramped old patio garden in Leeds; and it was at least three times the size of her grandparents' garden in

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[523] Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden* (1911; London: Vintage, 2012); Philippa Pearce's, *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[524] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 143.

Beverley.'[525] Rather, the garden evokes a 'cosseted, Home Counties, 1950s, childhood, of the sort with which Rachel was also familiar, if only in a second-hand way, through countless vintage children's novels', texts which she devoured from the local library when growing up.[526] The library and the welfare state are marked out as the mechanism through which Rachel is afforded the opportunity to experience this garden, and establishes it as distinct from her more modest formative experience. Coe collapses access to the middle-class garden within the opportunity-enhancing drive of the welfare state, a mechanism which is being undermined in the moment of *Number 11*'s publication.

Number 11 presents a brutal conclusion to this nostalgic drive. Roger's quest for the film takes him to Germany with an academic colleague James, where, together, they rummage through two containers of the possessions of a descendant of the film's director. On climbing into one of the containers, Roger is crushed by these possessions in his bid to recover the film. After Roger's body is removed from the scene, James '*spotted the item that*

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[525] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 144.
[526] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 144.

he must have seen', which '*would have been at the very bottom of the pile, but in his eagerness to put his hands on it, he must have tried to pull it out from underneath*' causing the tower of junk to fall and crush him.[527] The item in question is '*a metal can of the sort which might have contained a 16mm film, and on the side of it was a label, upon which was written, in faded capital letters – more than seventy years old –* Der Garten aus Kristall.'[528] The film is missing: '*It was full of old tobacco tins, most of them containing Deutschmark coins in small denominations. Also some buttons and ribbon and needle and thread and other things for sewing'*. James adds with relief, '*perhaps it's a good job he never saw that. Perhaps if he had, he might have died another kind of death.'*[529] The pursuit to recover experiences of childhood imbued with fond and nostalgic memories is fruitless. They belong to the past and cannot be recovered, the novel suggests, and to try to do so may involve disastrous results, so much so, in the case of Roger that they kill the vigorous pursuer.

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[527] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 174.
[528] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 174.
[529] Coe, *Number 11*, pp. 174-175. Italics in the original.

In *Number 11*, childhood and the past are imbricated with (re)emergent political ideas in the moment of austerity. James Walton's claim that 'Coe wonders whether the desire of old Lefties to return to a kinder, gentler Britain might sometimes be based on a simple longing for childhood' is clearly central to Roger's drive to relive the experience of the film that is symbolic of his early life.[530] But this assessment fails to capture the whole picture of what Coe's text conveys. Roger's obsession with the film, Laura explains, wasn't '"a hankering for childhood"' but a desire for 'passivity', for a 'time when we trusted the people in power, and their side of the deal was to treat us… not like children exactly, but like people who needed to be looked after now and again.'[531] As a form of paternalism, childhood is reconstituted as an affective experience whereby the government facilitates individual lives. Roger's political values confer not a set of political ideals but affective political values in relation to institutions – trust, for example – and a faith in institutions to operate. Coe suggests Postwar life is not only about

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[530] James Walton, 'Jonathan Coe: poking fun at broken Britain', *Telegraph*, 1 November 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/authors/jonathan-coe-interview-number-eleven/> [access 5 August 2018].

[531] Coe, *Number 11*, pp. 176-177.

welfarism but the social formations it produces. It is also about the lively operation of a social contract between different classes that Coe suggests produces a form of social harmony.

In Coe's novel, nostalgia complicates and broadens what has been argued in the first section of this chapter that austerity is a personalised form of violence. In this section of the text, Coe reveals how austerity intersects with postwar nostalgia through a misguided longing for an economic and social set of relations in this period. But *Number 11* iterates this longing as an affective experience that at once relates to childhood *and* to an implicit social contract between the governing and the governed. Characteristic of Coe's reflexive style, *Number 11* extends the notion of nostalgia as longing for a set of economic and social values and a personalised ontology, to a formal quality. The final section of this chapter turns the focus on the self-reflexive characteristics of *Number 11* in the context of Coe's oeuvre and suggests that nostalgia and austerity emerge as a formal and cyclical quality. This is the iterative condition of austerity.

The Iterative Condition of Austerity

Before a word of *Number 11* is read, the text announces itself as situated in a literary and political tradition. The epigraph is from Coe's novel on Thatcherism, *What a Carve Up!* (1994) the precursor to *Number 11*:

> 'Because there comes a point, you know, Michael' – he leaned forward and pointed at him with the syringe – 'there comes a point where greed and madness become practically indistinguishable. One and the same thing, you might almost say. And there comes another point whether the willingness to tolerate greed, and to live alongside it, and even to assist it, becomes a sort of madness too.'[532]

Number 11, this epigraph intimates, will address the same themes as *What A Carve Up!*, suggesting a continuation of Coe's interest in politics as bound up with neoliberalism. Coe compared the two novels in one interview and insisted that *What A Carve Up!* 'was never about Mrs Thatcher (whom it barely mentions) but about Thatcherism; and Thatcherism has never gone away in the 24 years since Mrs Thatcher herself left office'.[533] He asserted that 'John Major, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, and David Cameron have all presided over Thatcherite governments'.[534]

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[532] Coe, *Number 11*. Page number not provided.
[533] Jonathan Coe in Guignery, *Jonathan Coe*, pp. 145-146.
[534] Coe in Guignery, *Jonathan Coe*, pp. 145-146.

This sense of political continuity emerges as a literary continuation. Trawling through Roger's notes, Rachel discovers a brief summary of an obscure film, which gives its name to the novel's final section: 'What a Whopper' and *What a Whopper*. Roger's notes describe his own, and Coe's, penchant for B-movies: '*Lame British comedy* […][.] 1962. *Sequel to* What a Carve Up! (*1961*). *Not really. Two of the same actors. *Sequels which are not really sequels. Sequels where the relationship to the original is oblique, slippery.*'[535] *Number 11* may not be a reliable sequel. Few characters survive *What A Carve Up!*, and those who have, such as the artist Phoebe, exist in this text in a marginal way. Rather, what can be regarded as a continuation is the shared concern with inequality, economics, and satire, and how the same dynamics apply but have different characteristics. For example, Sir Peter Eaves demands Josephine abandon the outmoded villain which made her mother famous in *What a Carve Up!*: ''black one-legged lesbian on benefits'.[536] Josephine's attempt to revitalise her mother's success in a column for a national tabloid belongs to an earlier

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[535] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 152.
[536] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 195.

moment when he tells her it is outmoded but this is a political continuity with differences.[537]

The recycling of similar issues and themes in the novel conveys a sense of repetition and Coe has described *Number 11* 'as a sort of "Jonathan Coe's greatest hits": everything I've done in fiction before is thrown into this novel and done in concentrated form.'[538] As an abridged version of Coe's oeuvre, *Number 11* is a novel dominated by Coe's self-reflexive intertextuality. For Vanessa Guignery, this device indicates the novel's re-constituting of the gothic, the hauntological, and the uncanny.[539] But repetition is also a mark of austerity culture. A series of national events from the first age of austerity (in the postwar period) – including a royal wedding, the Olympic games, and the coronation – were repeated or commemorated over 2011-2012. These ceremonies took the form of Prince William's marriage to Kate Middleton, the 2012 London Olympic games, and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations. For Bramall, these are 'national austerity events' that were 'discursively worked up as

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[537] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 195.

[538] Coe in 'Laughing Out Loud with Jonathan Coe: A Conversation', quoted in Vanessa Guignery, 'Gothic Horror and Haunting Processes in Jonathan Coe's *Number 11*', p. 169.

[539] Guignery, 'Gothic Horror and Haunting Processes in Jonathan Coe's *Number 11*', pp. 169-184

doubles, reiterations, or anniversaries within the wider paradigm of analogy in austerity discourse […], generating a sense that history is repeating itself.'[540] Repetition serves as a significant component of contemporary austerity culture: iterations, reproductions, re-fashioned copies, borrowing from Austerity Britain, re-emerge in the contemporary period of austerity and repeat again and again. I call this the iterative condition of austerity.

Perhaps the most obvious example of the iterative condition of austerity is the ubiquitous Keep Calm and Carry on Posters. In their traditional format, the posters appear in Fire Engine (or London Bus) red and emblazoned across them in white sans serif font are the words that give the posters their name. Originally designed and printed in 1939, these posters were intended for use in the event of a Nazi invasion of Britain. When they re-emerged in 2008 in the North East of England, they became the requisite austerity chic kitsch in the years immediately after the crash.[541] Appearing on market stalls in the UK,

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[540] Bramall, *The Cultural Politics of Austerity*, p. 4.

[541] Jeremy Gilbert, 'Sharing the Pain: The Emotional Politics of Austerity', *Democracy Now*, 28 January 2011, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/sharing-pain-emotional-politics-of-austerity/> [accessed 15 June 2019].

and subsequently worldwide, in Britain's homes, on keyrings, mugs, social media profile pictures, bags, aprons, cushions, hoodies, t-shirts, and placemats, the combination of the slogan in white on the red backdrop took on a powerful and recognisable meaning in a Britain bound up with austerity and newly austere ways of living, thriftily and frugaly.[542] But the format has taken on other forms. Owen Hatherley notes the ways in which businesses have adopted the poster's iconography and slogan to encourage consumers to pay utility bills, whereas, on the other hand, activists have mobilised the slogan to demonstrate against police brutality and in the campaign to save Lewisham Hospital.[543] On keepcalmandcarryon.com, users are invited to generate their own slogan where any word from the original mantra is replaced and transferred onto an item of the individual's choosing. Keep Calm and Carry On has been adopted, refashioned, and appropriated by multiple groups to enhance home interiors, adorn social media profiles, advertise services provided, and further political campaigns. These uses are as diverse as they are many. The one

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[542] Owen Hatherley, *The Ministry of Nostalgia* (London: Verso, 2015), p. 18. Ebook.

[543] Hatherley, *The Ministry of Nostalgia*, pp. 39-42.

constant is the white font and red background. It is the way in which it is repeated, articulated, and always maintains connotations of English resolution, austerity, and nostalgia that remains constant. Jeremy Gilbert describes the slogan as vapid, offering 'a national community is sustained in the face of its destruction only by a wilful denial of the reality of its defeat'.[544] But, it is precisely the formal quality of the poster that is useful as a cultural object of austerity. It is reproduction in the same form over and over that announces this object's repeated, iterative quality.

Such iterations extend beyond austerity as cultural phenomena and bridge the divide between nostalgic cultural symbol and contemporary class-based forms of structural violence. In 'The New Neoliberalism', Will Davies claims a new stage of neoliberalism occurred after 2008. If the first period of neoliberalism in Britain was 'combative', in the years 1979-1989 where neoliberalism as economic policy was established, and 'normative' until 2008 where the virtue of markets, the designation of winners and losers, and concepts such as human capital became normative practice for all under the

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[544] Jeremy Gilbert, 'Sharing the Pain: The Emotional Politics of Austerity'.

philosophy; in its most recent manifestation, neoliberalism is 'punitive'. Today, neoliberalism's major motivating instinct is to punish. Davis concludes his essay by considering whether neoliberalism represents contemporary life in Britain:

> One way of interpreting the apparently senseless violence of punitive neoliberalism is as a strategy for the circumvention of crisis and, at the same time, an avoidance of critique. In place of critical forms of knowledge, which necessarily represent the deficiencies of the present, forms of empty affirmation are offered, to be repeated ritualistically. These lack any epistemological or semiotic aspiration to represent reality, but are instead ways of reinforcing it. When political leaders say that austerity will result in economic growth, the purpose of such speech acts is to repeat, not to represent. Likewise, when benefit claimants are compelled to recite slogans such as 'My only limits are the ones I set myself', these are plainly not statements of truth or fact. They are […] performative utterances which seek to preserve the status quo and to occupy the discursive space that might otherwise be filled by empirical or critical questions about the nature of reality.[545]

In this iteration, neoliberalism seeks to maintain a situation in which it will avoid responsibility for its part in creating crises. By actively repeating statements that contribute to a policy view, political actors maintain neoliberalism. Anticipating the colloquial term 'fake news' to describe political untruths, these repeated utterances assure and justify

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[545] Davies, 'The New Neoliberalism', pp. 132-133.

and confirm whatever is required. Across a range of contexts – from benefit claimants who must repeat them to the political actors who shape government policy – these iterative statements exist to reaffirm the prevailing logic of neoliberalism as a form of biopolitics. Exploration, questions, critique must be abandoned, Davies suggests, and in their place, there is an available script of utterances which must be readily repeated.

Coe employs stylistic strategies that confirm the presence of this iterative condition of austerity. The number eleven is one such example. It implies, first and foremost, the residence of the Chancellor of the Exchequer – 11 Downing Street. The number and the office are bound up with austerity policy. Yet, as we have seen, the number signifies other – ostensibly arbitrary – symbols in the novel: it is a bus, a container in which a dead filmmaker's most prized possessions live on; it is the table on which a comedian enjoys a cultural prize ceremony, waiting to be murdered; it is the number of levels a tunnel is being dug in order to please a profligate member of the superrich. These random objects would seem to have no logical unitary connection, except for the numeral as the motif that binds them and the novel.

For Robert Epstein, the use of number eleven 'feels more like tricksy motif than integral theme', a device that 'is let down by being too obvious, both in its targets and in their subsequent takedown'.[546] This, however, is deliberate, to emphasise at once the number's symbolic resonance with austerity and inequality and to the act of repetition as reiteration.

Such repeated acts are manifold and relate directly to the experience of poverty. Val's repeated return to the number eleven bus is a focal example of how Coe emphasises austerity, the precariat, and the way in which actuality and experience meet in these iterative acts. In a more concrete way, he merges the repetitive act of riding the bus – to avoid the cold of her home – with the image of a circle, Birmingham's out with the bus moving through some of Birmingham's well-known suburbs: *Perry Barr – Handsworth – Winson Green – Bearwood – Harborne – Selly Oak – Cotteridge – Kings Heath – Hall Green – Acocks Green – Yardley – Stetchford – Fox & Goose – Erdington – Witton – Perry Barr*.[547]

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[546] Robert Epstein, 'Jonathan Coe Number 11: Slating the Obvious – book review', *Guardian*, 15 November 2015, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/jonathan-coe-number-11-slating-the-obvious-a6733681.html> [accessed 9 July 2018].

[547] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 88.

This 26-mile journey takes around two and a half hours in total and runs in both directions – 'sometimes clockwise, sometimes anti-clockwise'[548] – producing the effect of an endless cycle. This seemingly everlasting journey serves as a metaphor for the precariat in the context of austerity. Evoking the 'cycle of poverty' in which Val is trapped, the allegory of the bus provides the illusion that Val can get off – and escape her situation – if she simply presses the button for the bus to stop. However, Val's attempts to escape her economic situation – to get off the bus – are shown to be impossible.[549]

Taken together, the image of the cycle and the various iterative utterances and acts go beyond simply presenting how Val mitigates the effects of poverty for the precariat because Coe emphasises the traumatic consequences of such an experience. At first, he seems to suggest that Val's quotidian experience on the bus can bring about a quiet, meditative state: 'Two and a half hours in which nothing was required of her, except to sit still, to watch the comings and goings of the other

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[548] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 89.
[549] See John Welshman's discussion of Keith Joseph and the 'cycle of deprivation', Welshman, *Underclass*, pp. 107-126.

passengers, and to allow her thoughts to drift in spiralling patterns which mirrored the bus's slow, circular progress.'[550] But Val's thoughts wander to her personal experiences of austerity as well as the structural causes. While Val ponders on how bankers working in the financial industry avoided the economic consequences she herself faces, she ruminates on her experience of mainstream television as part of a comedy routine that has traumatised her. These concerns dominate her thinking throughout her journeys and contradict the intimation that this experience is somehow restorative.

She is continually disrupted by the place names of the Birmingham suburbs through which the bus takes her: '– *Yardley – Stetchford – Fox & Goose –*'; '– *Fox & Goose – Erdington – Witton – Perry Bar – Handsworth –*'; '– *Handsworth – Winson Green – Bearwood –*'; '– *Bearwood – Harborne – Selly Oak –*'; '– *Selly Oak – Cotteridge – Kings Heath –*'; '– *Kings Heath – Hall Green – Acocks Green – Yardley*'.[551] Detailing and enumerating the entire route over two pages shows how quickly the time passes, not an unusual device for a novel to employ.

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[550] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 89.
[551] Coe, *Number 11*, pp. 89-90.

But, place names interrupt the flow of the text and serve to emphasise the passage of time in relation to the space through which Val has passed. These iterative announcements emphasise the time Val has lost and continues to lose as they interrupt Val's contemplative thought. Vickie Cooper and David Whyte's idea of austerity as institutional violence takes on a different resonance here, especially the need 'to see violence not as "exceptional" or "unusual" events but "ordinary" and "mundane" processes that routinely and over time deteriorate our mental and physical health.'[552] *Number 11* relates the quotidian bus route, and iterative place names to emphasise how insistently and consistently austerity materialises as punitive to Val - and, by extension, the precariat.

Val's narrative occurs in an ironically entitled section, called 'The Comeback.' It is concerned with the notion of the return. 'The Comeback' is meant to indicate Val's return to celebrity status and career success, but ultimately, the return embodies Val's return to poverty and her life under austerity. From Australia, Val is unceremoniously returned to the

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[552] Cooper and Whyte, 'Introduction', pp. 23-24.

number eleven bus and her misery continues in circularity: 'the comeback.'

Rachel's narrative would seem to conform to the ideal of the bildungsroman, in the manner of upward mobility. Her personal development, however, is challenged. When Rachel writes a piece of autobiographical text, she wonders whether she is hallucinating: 'I have to assume,' she begins, 'for the sake of my own sanity, that I am going mad.'[553] She believes she has seen a gigantic creature – a spider. She is writing in an attempt to stabilise her mental well-being: 'if I allowed myself to believe that, surely the horror of it would also make me lose my mind.'[554] To pretend she is going mad to avoid confronting the possibility of her downward psychological status is one option open to her and the other is to confront this possibility. 'In other words, I'm trapped', she writes.[555] Rachel's mental health speaks to Coe's interest in greed and madness, as the epigraph makes clear, but the sense of entrapment is more useful for understanding for what Coe does here. Rachel presently working as a nanny is, Coe writes, 'Rachel

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[553] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 319.

[554] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 319.

[555] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 319.

was trapped, in effect.'[556] She is both physically and psychologically detained in this scenario and within the broader entrapment within the novel, a sense that the novel is encouraging a looping that encourages a return to the beginning of the novel and Rachel's 'attempt to set down the story of my second visit to Beverley to stay with my grandparent, in the summer of 2003'.[557] Rachel's desire to return to the memory of childhood mirrors Roger's failed attempt at salvage but her return is also imbued with a formative experience: the death of Dr David Kelly, the UN weapons inspector, in Oxfordshire. She writes,

> I don't really know why I think so often about David Kelly's death, I can only suppose it's because, at the age of ten, it was all the national news story that made any impression on me at all. Maybe, too, because it evoked such a strong and chilling image: the loneliness of his death, the body discovered so many hours later in that remote woodland, silent and unvisited. Or maybe because of the way Gran and Grandad reacted: the way they made it clear that this was not an ordinary death, that it would have consequences, send ripples of unease and mistrust throughout the country.[558]

This event proves formative for Rachel; it is both personal and a national trauma initiating acute levels of distrust in the country and far-reaching effects.

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[556] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 318.
[557] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 320.
[558] Coe, *Number 11*, pp. 16-17.

Rachel returns to a specific, British event in the global context of 9/11 and the start of the Iraq War. This moment in which Rachel fears madness is inextricably linked to Kelly's death and, the corruption it implies, because both, Coe intimates, are events of national madness.

Rachel makes clear that the return to her childhood is to a specific instance: 'A visit I made not with my brother this time but with Alison, my dear friend Alison, who at last after so many years' mysterious distance I have found again'.[559] Rachel does not return to the moment her brother plays a cruel trick on her by scaring her in a crypt but to the moment of Kelly's death when Alison accompanies her. Coe plays with the idea of where the novel should begin, and given Coe's text's interest in mapping out a longer political and literary history between this text and *What a Carve Up!*, marks this out for the reader's consideration. The ambiguity of where the beginning should be precisely is left unconfirmed: 'Let's go back to the very beginning.'[560] Readers are steered to understand this as unclear because Rachel's 'memoir' is reproduced

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[559] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 320.
[560] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 320.

from chapter two of section one in the novel, and its second appearance in chapter sixteen of section five is embedded in the text.[561] Leaving unclear whether Coe's novel is Rachel's memoir, *Number 11* blurs textual boundaries within its own limits and operates cyclically, as the reproduction of passages attests, formally invites a return to the beginning through repeated iterations.

Such iterations and repeated instances are a critical part of the precariat's experience. Coe represents this at the level of character and formally. By performing the same acts over and over, the precariat lives in a sustained but unknowable permanent present. This is the concern of the next chapter but *Number 11* ends with a sense of what Rebecca Coleman defining 'austerity futures' calls a mood of 'hopeful pessimism.'[562] In the final moment, it is revealed who is responsible for the murders of the superrich: it is a friend of Rachel's, a Romanian migrant living in London, Livia who has committed the act. Livia is able to transform herself into a huge spider – 'a new form of terror' – that is as destructive

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[561] Coe, *Number 11*, p. 320, pp, 14-15, pp. 319-320.
[562] Rebecca Coleman, 'Austerity Futures: Debt, Temporality and (Hopeful) Pessimism as an Austerity Mood', *New Formations,* 87.19 (2016), pp. 83-101 (p. 100).

as it is impressive. In a monologue, she addresses readers directly: 'I am not angry. I am anger itself.'[563] The creature embodies the affective experience of the precarious subject. Through Livia, it is easy to see why Coleman observes that a perpetual present 'may also involve highlighting – through anger, rage and frustration – that the present and the future hold "nothing".'[564] It is a constitutive lack of a foothold in the present for the precariat that is a potentially useful source of social transformation here.

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[563] Tew, 'Neogothic Minutiae and Mundanity in Jonathan Coe's *Number 11*', p. 199; Coe, *Number 11*, p. 351.
[564] Rebecca Coleman, 'Austerity Futures: Debt, Temporality and (Hopeful) Pessimism as an Austerity Mood', p. 100.

Chapter Five

Brexit and the Hyper Present: Class Temporalities in Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* (2017) and Ali Smith's *Spring* (2019)

> The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.
>
> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (1971)

This thesis has investigated three-character types – the millennial, the migrant-refugee, and the figure of austerity – as subjects that are supplanting the amorphous middle of a classless society. By mapping the ways in which Lanchester's *Capital* presents a microcosm of British and global economic and social relations, Lanchester captured the classless society as a set of networked subjects. In a moment of national significance – the financial crisis – *Capital* raises the possibility for a sea change in the fortunes of the middle class that comprise the classless society. But, this thesis has also proposed three potential figures – the millennial, the migrant-refugee, and the figure of austerity – who replace this formation in economic, social, cultural, and political terms. This final chapter

seeks to bring together the ideas explored in the earlier chapters by placing them in conversation with a theme Standing raises: time. It is proposed here that the precariat – as class subject – be considered in relation to time and the cultural moment in which it has emerged.

This chapter analyses how writers paying attention to neoliberalism render the precariat in a sustained present – the 'hyper present' – in Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* (2017) and the third novel in Ali Smith's seasonal quartet *Spring* (2019). It argues that Cartwright and Smith create a sense of the post-crash cultural moment as situated in an elongated present. Naming 'class temporalities' as a class-specific experience of time (class-time), it builds on the previous chapter's suggestion that Val Doubleday is located in a permanent present because she is trapped in an ongoing cycle. Standing's contention is that the 'tertiary lifestyle' – a situation in which 'the precariat is at risk of being […] forced to juggle demands on limited time' – involves 'multitasking without control over a narrative of time use, of seeing the future and building on the past.'[565] This explication of class-specific time constitutes the

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[565] Standing, *The Precariat*, p.204, p. 224.

precariat as a subject existing in a permanent present. The precariat may be required to apply repeatedly for endless fixed-term contracts while performing labour, which results in a reduction of leisure time, as well as limiting the ability to plan. Francis Plug is such a character and Nadia and Saeed exist in a state of permanent liminality, a status of perpetual flight. Without being a citizen of Greece, Britain or the US, they cannot access the protections citizens enjoy, nor to participate in economic or political life. As such, they are located in a permanent now, between nations, status, and time.

Under neoliberalism, if global and personal barriers of time are less distinct, then, as Standing observes, 'the global economy has no respect for human physiology'.[566] Instead, he suggests, [t]he global market is 'a 24/7 machine.'[567] To accommodate this market, traditional conceptions of time cannot be barriers to trade, or restrict competition, or contradict the principle of flexibility inherent in neoliberal rationality: 'If a country firm or individual does not adapt to the 24/7 time culture, there will be a price to pay' because it 'is no longer a

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[566] Standing, *The Precariat*, p. 198.
[567] Standing, *The Precariat*, p. 198.

case of "the early bird catches the worm"; it is the sleepless bird that does so.'[568] If neoliberalism disregards temporal barriers, as well as spatial ones, two consequences for the precariat are the collapse of labour time and leisure, lack of distinction between the workplace and home life. A distinct absence of time for both labour and leisure in this scenario has been called 'time poverty' and efforts to concretise the concept emphasise the increased salience of this lacuna in contemporary social relations.[569]

In Chapter 2, I discussed how time in post-Fordist societies asserts a disorienting and totalising effect over the physical experience and psychological cognitive ontology of the worker. Under post-Fordism:

> Work and life become inseparable. Capital follows you when you dream. Time ceases to be linear, becomes chaotic, broken down into punctiform divisions. As production and distribution are restructured, so are nervous systems. To function effectively as a component of just-in-time production you must develop a capacity to respond to unforeseen events, you must learn to live in conditions of total instability, or 'precarity', as the ugly neologism has it. Periods of work alternate with periods of unemployment. Typically, you find yourself employed in a

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[568] Standing, *The Precariat*, pp. 198-199.

[569] Clair Vickery, 'The Time-Poor: A New Look at Poverty', *The Journal of Human Resources*, 21.1 (1977), 27-48; Jason R. Williams, Yuta J. Masuda, and Heather Tallis, 'A Measure Whose Time has Come: Formalizing Time Poverty', *Social Indicators Research*, 128.1 (2016), 265-283.

series of short-term jobs, unable to plan for the future.[570]

The disruption of labour time defies labour patterns as mandated by labourism. Concentrated around capital's demand for production, workers find themselves working around the clock in supermarkets, call centres, and eateries. If capital claims to provide workers with more autonomy, and enhanced flexibility, this designates to the worker the ability to take control over when work is started (usually, this refers to a window of when work can begin) or some control over where work is performed (at home, in a coffee shop, or in the workplace). This situation, of course, provides benefits for capital, business, and organisations: the workplace may be reduced in scale, allowing organisations to reduce costs in terms of space, desks, and the materials required to perform work – such as an internet connection, stationary, or electricity. All are outsourced to the worker. Workers empowered with this version of autonomy take on implicit forms of accountability, which results in a false understanding that the work is hers rather than performed on behalf of capital. *Homo oeconomicus* is not – as my reading of Ewen's novel implied – only a condition of

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[570] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 34.

workers in the knowledge economy. As Standing discusses, workers who do not have fixed working conditions may exist on temporary or precarious contracts and might need to spend lots of time applying for work in a competitive labour market with a vigorous administration process. For those who work in the gig economy – taxi drivers, fast food workers, and delivery drivers – work is not guaranteed, burdensome and often takes longer than has been designated by the organisation, resulting in a loss of time and pay for their labour.

Moreover, the precariat's existence, shifting from one fixed-term contract to the next, designates horizontal mobility, opposed to the upward and downward mobility described by aspirational narratives. Imbued with a sense of optimism, these sideways movements are described as worthwhile and promise to benefit workers in the future, although often, the experience involves – paradoxically – a form of stasis as Chapter Two suggested. Critically, this denial of the future, to which Fisher attests, is at once the core of precariat experience and reflects the condition of neoliberalism (and the effects it produces). For Fisher, it is this condition, that sees the suspension of time but with life continuing as normal,

that marks twenty-first -century culture. Critically, however, this 'stasis has been buried, interred behind a superficial frenzy of "newness", of perpetual movement'.[571] Fisher argues 'The "jumbling up of time", the montaging of earlier eras, has ceased to be worthy of comment; it is now so prevalent that it is no longer even noticed.'[572] Building on Fisher's idea of the scrambling of time under neoliberalism, where work can be performed at any time because of enhanced flexibility. There is a need to consider neoliberalism not only as a way of restructuring economic life and social relations, but also the cultural mechanism of the world we inhabit is what the novel form does by focusing on a specific moment, zeitgeist, affect, and what is static, or cyclical for characters caught up in this moment. As I argue in this chapter, there is something specific about those fictions that explore the condition Fisher describes, with *The Cut* and *Spring* both using formal limitation as a means of reflecting the impossibility of recognising a future that has been denied with austerity implemented as a continued erosion of state spending that materialises in being trapped in time.

[571] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero, 2014), p. 6.
[572] Fisher, *Ghosts Of My Life*, p. 6.

As the representation of Val Doubleday's life suggests, austerity is experienced as a cyclical and repeated downward spiral into misery. Public space for Val is privatised (she must pay to ride the bus) and unsafe (she is subjected to abuse). Val's misery on the circular bus route in Birmingham is my route into the novels that are the focus of this chapter, and an experience of poverty articulated as stasis, characterised by a horizontal mobility, habitually moving in a circle and entrapment.

The precariat also suffers from too much time in the form of underemployment and Cartwright explore this feature though Cairo, a manual-labourer in Dudley, in the West Midlands, who is contracted precariously by his ex-wife's new husband, Tony Clancey, a small business owner with a dubious personal and professional history. During one workday, the weather changes and the indeterminate condition of precarious employment is emphasised: 'Tony is telling them to knock off, even though everyone knows the rain will blow over. Tony wants to save a day's money and Cairo can feel a sickness rising in him. He'll be a day short this week now.'[573] Cairo's embodied response conveys how visceral the

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[573] Cartwright, *The Cut*, p. 36.

status of insecure labour is for individuals. Granted more time by being sent home early, Cairo is situated outside a global neoliberal marketplace and ubiquitous working practices. As a manual labourer, Cairo is recoded as an agricultural labourer, dependent on the generosity of the weather to meet his material needs, is tethered to the unpredictability of both capital and the weather.

Zooming out from this moment, in *The Cut* Cartwright creates a sense of a hyper-present temporality. Structurally, the novel is constituted of nineteen chapters, entitled either 'After' or 'Before.' The first is 'After' and alternates with 'Before' to conclude with a final 'After'. These imprecise temporalities indicate before and after the Referendum. 'Before' and 'After', however, are not the only dualities. Cartwright also pivots on the cultural and economic differences attached to 'Leave' and 'Remain' voters. Cairo is contrasted with Grace, a documentary filmmaker from Hampstead, London. They have something of a shared history insofar as Grace's interest in Dudley is personal because 'Her own family had come through this way', but ultimately are presented in terms of

economic, cultural, political and social division.[574] Nonetheless, it is the temporal distinction between Before and After that constitutes the novel. The switching between the past and future between Before and After, locates the Referendum as a focal point of rupture, an event that is not delimited by time but rather by its status as an event. The 'event' of Brexit is a temporally amorphous moment in *The Cut*, situated between the imprecise build up to and fall out from the vote. The novel moves between After and Before in perpetuity, locating readers firmly within the frame of this moment and between the two temporalities that trap readers in the continuous and the ill-defined temporal moment of Brexit. Thus, a temporal liminality, mirrors the hyper-present ontology of Cairo, similarly trapped in a temporal bind that is marked by precarity and conveys a broader sense of being trapped between a past he has no say over and a future for which he cannot possibly plan.

The Cut opens with a traumatic scene: a 'young woman runs burning along the side of the marketplace, down the High Street, away from the fountain': 'She is tall, long-legged. Her hair is ablaze

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[574] Cartwright, *The Cut*, pp. 41-42.

and flames spit from an unravelling scarf towards the motley crowd of people who give chase. […] She breathes fire.'[575] Engulfed in flames in this shocking opening scene, Cartwright depicts one of the hate crimes perpetrated on minority ethnic groups following the Referendum.[576] He uses this scene not only to emphasise the brutality of these crimes but also to enable a site of renewal; 'To begin again, the day, his life, to begin'.[577] Registering the potentiality of hope that such a statement evokes, *The Cut* suggests a perpetual re-making of the present in a repeated action, to begin each day over and over again. The novel closes however with a similar yet different, scene where Cairo is ablaze in the square, but this time, it is clear who has committed the act: Cairo himself. His suicide arises because of his inability to deal with the actuality of his life. In framing the novel with two shocking, tragic incidents that occur in 'After' – where the novel is produced

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[575] Cartwright, *The Cut*, p. 7.

[576] Matt Weaver, '"Horrible spike" in hate crime linked to Brexit vote, Met police say', *Guardian*, 28 September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/sep/28/hate-crime-horrible-spike-brexit-vote-metropolitan-police>
[accessed 23 June 2019]. Jon Burnett, 'Racial violence and the Brexit state', *Race & Class*, 58.4 (2017), 85-97; Daniel Devine, 'Hate crime did spike after the referendum – even allowing for other factors', *LSE Brexit*, 2018, https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=hate+crimes+brexit&btnG=> [accessed 23 June 2019].

[577] Cartwright, *The Cut*, p. 9.

and experienced – Cartwright creates a sense of a permanent present.

The epigraph from Gramsci selected for this chapter evokes this liminal cultural present. While it refers specifically to the rise of Fascism in 1930s Italy, contemporary commentators and critics revive the idea of this interregnum to refer to the contemporary failure of neoliberal economics.[578] Indeed, as Philipp Ther says, if migration and austerity caused Brexit, the financial crisis, and its associated policies, enabled the conditions for voters to favour Leave in the Referendum.[579] If the financial crisis contributed to a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, undermined economic stability and fostered neo-protectionist and neo-nationalist sentiment, Gramsci's morbid symptoms can be plainly seen. This period, it may be ventured, is quantifiable as a cultural moment, comparable to that to which Gramsci refers. For Raymond Williams, a cultural moment is a 'structure of feeling' and conveys the affective experience of a period.[580]

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[578] Nancy Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born: From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond* (London: Verso, 2019).

[579] Philipp Ther, *Europe Since 1989: a history* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 1.

[580] Raymond Williams and Michael Orrom, *A Preface to Film* (London: Film Drama, 1954).

Williams writes: 'While we may, in the study of a past period, separate out particular aspects of life, and treat them as if they were self-contained,' he asserts that 'it is obvious that this is only how they may be studied, not how they were experienced.'[581] Establishing a distinction between how periods are observed retrospectively and how they are experienced at the time, Williams points towards an experiential engagement with time, culture, and the social that is, temporality, the experience of a moment. 'We examine each element as a precipitate,' Williams continues, 'but in the living experience of the time every element was in solution, an inseparable part of a complex whole.'[582]

A period cannot be reduced to composite parts, its most interesting elements selected by the cultural critic, the philosopher, or the historian. William's analysis allows for a totalising, immersive and experiential approach to interpreting a period. A structure of feeling 'lies deeply embedded in our lives; it cannot be merely extracted and summarized; it is perhaps only in art […] that it can be realized,

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[581] Raymond Williams, 'Film and the Dramatic Tradition', in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, ed. by John Higgins (1954; Oxford, MA: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 25-41 (p. 33).
[582] Williams, 'Film and the Dramatic Tradition', p. 33.

and communicated, as a whole experience.'[583] Williams suggests the sensibility of an epoch that cannot be reduced to singular parts. The events of the climate crisis, the uprisings in the Middle East, Brexit, the financial crisis, the refugee crisis as constituting this era must be recognised in totality, as a structure of feeling. The novel is a form suited to exploring an extended or elongated present. Unlike other cultural forms – the play, the poem, or film – the novel demands dedicated time for consideration, and attention. With the advent of platforms like *Netflix* and *Amazon Prime* and the popularity of 'on demand' programming, even the television series is losing its ability to sustain commitment over a sustained period. The novel has not been subject to such a transformation, despite the vigorous influence of technologies on reading through eBooks, Kindle, and audio books like *Audible*, enabling readers to listen on-the-go. A novel still takes time to read.

If Williams' structure of feeling suggests how a period is experienced, then, Ali Smith's *Spring* goes some way towards capturing the totality of experiencing an elongated moment, the present post-Referendum, post-the-triggering-of-Article 50, in

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[583] Williams and Orrom, *A Preface to Film*, p. 40.

pre-Leave Britain. In a long, continuous address, she attempts to distil the totality of political discourse in Britain: 'Now what we don't want is Facts. What we want is bewilderment. What we want is repetition. What we want is repetition'. The reiterative 'we' is expressive of an anti-liberal and populist discourse, Smith implies, that confuses, distracts, and re-directs political failure to specific working-class communities. 'We want the people we call foreign to feel foreign we need to make it clear they can't have rights unless we say so'; 'We need emotion we want righteousness we want anger. We need all that patriotic stuff'; 'We need to get to them we need them to think we can get to them get the world *lynching* to anyone not white'; 'We want rape threats death threats 24/7 to black/female members of parliament no just women doing anything public anyone doing anything public we don't like we need How Dare She/How Dare He/How Dare They; 'We need to deny what we're saying while we're saying it'; 'We need to say it's a new era the old era's dead their time's over it's our time now'; 'What we want is need. What we need is want.'[584] By borrowing from an acrimonious online culture, politically positioned

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[584] Smith, *Spring*, pp. 3-6.

newspaper headlines as propaganda, as well as conveying the visceral anger attached to politicians and voters alike, Smith pulls these disparate strands of public discourse into a single linguistic diatribe to crystallise a totalising sensation of British political culture in the moment of Brexit as a sensibility.

A more violent and aggressive voice than anonymous political statements is that of the planet. In one section, the narrative voice is a crocus, the feeblest of plants, and as it becomes clear, an organism of immense power that threatens a near and bleak future, one of seasonal change. 'I'm the green in the bulb and the moment of split in the seed, the unfurl of the petal, the dabber of ends of the branches of trees.'[585] The various and slow elements of life of a small crocus are emphasised, but the power of nature is violent: 'Mess up my climate, I'll fuck with your lives.'[586] The voice issues an apocalyptic warning: 'I'll yank your daffodils out of the ground in December. I'll block up your front door in April with snow and blow down that tree so it cracks your roof open. I'll carpet your house with the river.'[587] Encapsulating the climate threat, the novel evokes the

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[585] Smith, *Spring*, p. 7.
[586] Smith, *Spring*, p. 8.
[587] Smith, *Spring*, p. 8.

hauntological presence of impending climate disaster and situates the dreadful promise of environmental collapse in relation to the violent language of contemporary political discourse in Britain. The moment of Brexit is characterised by terrible personal and structural violence but planetary threats are not only the promise of disaster in the future; to the contrary, they are about the present moment of seasonal change as it unfolds presently.

When the novel asks, 'That time is it, again?', it implies a degree of surprise.[588] Seasons blur into each other, April showers occur in July and blasts of cold weather dominate in Spring. Smith's novel looks inward as the present is articulated self-referentially, drawing on the series of novels of which it is the third in a seasonal quartet wherein the political and ecological threats are identified as acute preoccupation with the present and the urgency of the now. When it looks outward it is to a broader precarious climate: the conditions of British workers, as precarity, and, for one character, the ostensible security an employment contract provides. Smith complicates the precariat in the character of Brittany, who works in a detention centre for asylum seekers

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[588] Smith, *Spring*, p. 7.

and Brittany comes to represent Britain. 'Brit', the truncation used to describe her, is both *a* Brit(on) and British boasts of a neoliberal subjecthood: 'I've taken a job that's got a salary', she says in an argument to her ex-boyfriend Josh. 'It's more than you're getting right now. It's definitely more than you got when you *were* working. It's a real job. Security delivers results.'[589] Brit takes pride in being securely employed and situates herself against the figure of the refugee as a 'benefit scrounger'. Through her personal income, she exerts her superiority, especially over Josh, who, because of an injury to his back, is unable to work. Brit's pride in self-reliance betrays a neoliberal sense of subjecthood but, as their argument reveals Britain is being construed as similarly:

> Security, Josh said. That's what you call it. I call it upholding the illusion. What illusion? She said. That keeping people out is what it's all about, he said. What *what's* all about? She said. Being British, he said. English. What the fuck are you on about? She said. Wall ourselves in, he said. Shoot ourselves in the foot. Great nation. Great country.[590]

Brit comes to symbolise how fiction in contemporary Britain operating in terms of a neoliberal biopolitics. As a worker in a detention centre, her labour is

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[589] Smith, *Spring*, p. 158.

[590] Smith, *Spring*, p. 158. Italics in the original.

intended to securitise Britain's porous borders and Josh's view is deemed illegitimate by Brit; 'Political correct metropolitan shit', is one charge she levels at him.[591] In Smith's novel, Britain is characterised by its borders, the securitisation of them and by social conservatism. When Brit says 'Security delivers results', she underlines the important work she is undertaking by holding refugees, at the same time that she evinces pride in not working precariously. The novel confirms: 'there were 30,000 people detained in this country at any one time, and that was the level of interned deets [detainees] across detention estate that kept SA4A [Brit's role] salaries stable.'[592] Detention creates secure working possibilities for Brit and disaggregates class solidarities, as can be seen in her exchange with Josh.

Despite her assertion that she is offered economic security like Cairo in *The Cut*, Brit also exists in a permanent present. For example, when she follows Florence, a child refugee, onto a train to Edinburgh from London, Brit has no idea where she is travelling: 'She is on a train with a child who's nothing to do with her, going God knows where, God

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[591] Smith, *Spring*, p. 158.
[592] Smith, *Spring*, p. 165.

knows why.'[593] Emphasising both the point of the journey and the destination as unknowable, Brit occupies a liminal space – between London and Edinburgh – with no understanding of how she will reach either: the past (London) is lost and the future (Edinburgh) is unattainable. In *Spring*, the train also serves as a metaphor for this sense of living in a hyper present. Similarly, on a platform at an unnamed train station in Scotland, the novel asks of a film director, Richard Lease, 'Why is he here?'[594] But as is quickly made clear: 'That's the wrong kind of question. It implies there's a story. There's no story. He's had it with story.'[595] The past is rejected – the story of how he got to such a place and why. Despite being a professional storyteller what is emphasised is his inability to confront the past: 'He is removing himself from story'.[596] Removing Richard's narrative role leaves him standing on the train platform for the present of the novel, for almost the entire duration of the narrative. His stasis is made significant, an intense present: 'He's just a man at a station'.[597] If there are readerly doubts about the need to focus on

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[593] Smith, *Spring*, p. 182.
[594] Smith, *Spring*, p. 11.
[595] Smith, *Spring*, p. 11.
[596] Smith, *Spring*, p. 11.
[597] Smith, *Spring*, p. 12.

his immobility, caught and held in liminal space, moments later the novel asks '*Where the fuck is Richard?*'[598] But is fixed in movement but Richard is fixed to the spot, train serving differently to accentuate two modes of the 'hyper present'.

Whereas *The Cut* offers distinct temporalities of Before and After, locating the precarious subject in a permanent present, *Spring* presents a hyper-present as a chaotic shifting in time. Each chapter opens with a declaration about time to locate events but they are uneven, and ill-defined or seem unnecessarily precise: 11.29 or 11.59, for example, or 'Then this happened. It was a Monday in October' or 'It was the time of the year when everything was dead.'[599] Time swivels on the specific and the abstract which creates the effect of time a both expanding and contracting, like a camera zooming in and zooming out when one chapter announces 11.29. Two chapters later opens with 'Still 11.29.'[600] As Brit's journey with the young refugee Florence suggests, time serves to expand and contract a single moment: 'Long long ago in the morning of what was actually still today, Brit had been on her way to work.

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[598] Smith, *Spring*, p. 12.
[599] Smith, *Spring*, p. 107, p. 169, p. 225.
[600] Smith, *Spring*, p. 27, p. 47.

But now, opposite her on a train speeding its way up the map of England, the girl Florence, is talking about the invisible life she says there is'.[601] Adopting the language of the fairy tale, the day is stretched out and construed as simultaneously taking place in another mythic time.

If *The Cut* is concerned with locating the precarious subject in a hyper-present moment, between 'Before' and 'After', *Spring* suggests that ill-defined and distant temporalities are part of a hyper-present. Unlike Smith's previous novels in the quartet – *Autumn* (2016) and *Winter* (2017) – which make the season central to the text and conclude on the incoming season, in *Spring*, April only arrives in the final moment of the novel. It is the promise of Spring in 2019 and the spirit of hope this season traditionally promises that form's the novel's ultimate trajectory. That the novel begins in October 2018 and concludes in April 2019 suggests that *Spring* prefaces the previous texts. The statement that winter is 'the time of year when everything was dead' mirrors *Winter*'s opening chapter where 'A great many things were dead.'[602] In this sense, *Spring*

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[601] Smith, *Spring*, p. 179.
[602] Smith, *Spring*, p. 225; Ali Smith, *Winter* (London: Penguin, 2017), p. 3.

renews the previous novels, and by beginning with autumn, progressing through winter, and concluding with spring, acts as a microcosm for the entire series. This device is indicative of the self-referentiality of the quartet, but also situates this text within the preicse political context with which the earlier texts are concerned. In this way, the rupture that the Brexit vote represents is thematically located in the present of late 2018 and early 2019 but neither locked there nor remanded to the past. The moment exists as a tense and febrile hyper-present.

The final section of the novel locates readers between the past of autumn and 'now': the moment of the narrative execution and of the reading 'That was October. It's now next March'.[603] It operates in a continual movement between Autumn and Spring as a single moment, defined by the seasons but out of sync with them. Even as it concludes, the text is emphatic that this extended present is this moment: 'But right now? It's still October.'[604] Autumn is the moment in which the present of Spring is contrived as it ushers in April.[605] *Spring* represents a hyper-present not as situated between ill-defined or

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[603] Smith, *Spring*, p. 269.
[604] Smith, *Spring*, p. 331.
[605] Smith, *Spring*, p. 335.

amorphous temporalities, but as a hyper-present in the extended present of Spring. As in *Number 11*, the feeling of entrapment manifests as trapped characters in a mobile temporality where the past and future are also the present and cannot be surmounted.

At the beginning of the period with which this thesis has been concerned, Mark Fisher wondered whether there was an alternative to neoliberalism.[606] Leftist critics have since claimed that the financial crisis represented a point of departure from which transformational change might be made manifest.[607] The change that would ostensibly see the end of neoliberalism has not yet materialised Brexit and Donald Trump's election to the presidency of the United States signal a potential site of transformation for an insurgent right. This thesis turns now to a concluding coda in order to think about the future of the novel in Britain after Brexit.

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[606] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*.

[607] For example, see Dean, *The Communist Horizon*; Mason, *Postcapitalism*; Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015); Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born*.

Coda

<u>A World to Win: The Novel After Brexit</u>

> The outline of a world immeasurably better than our own, more equal, prosperous, and creative, is there to see if only we dare to look.
>
> Aaron Bastani, *Full Automated Luxury Communism* (2019)

This thesis has attempted to initiate a critical debate in literary studies for where revitalised sites of enquiry for class might emerge. It has interrogated a fiction of the precariat specifically in twenty-first-century writing about Britain that relates to neoliberalism and the precise forms of exploitation it creates. As claimed in the Introduction 'the precariat', 'the working class', and other terms used to situate economic, social, cultural and political groups in relation to capitalism, are subject to transformation, and exemplified in new iterations, and reformations. Vocabularies of class must be updated frequently to ensure analyses of these relations continue to be asserted and essentially, that analyses reflect class as it is understood to be refigured under contemporary conditions of neoliberal capitalism.

Focus on the precariat has benefitted from Standing's theorisation of it. In two key works – among several articles – Standing maps out the defiant ways in which this figure emerges. When this project was first conceived, Standing's concept was new. His repeated refrain 'when will the precariat protest?' has taken on added significance in Britain more recently. Chapter Four is insistent in this context by focusing on the novel of austerity and coalescing economic and cultural production of figures subject to austerity in Coe's novel, most notably Val Doubleday. Published in 2015, by which time the first Conservative-majority government in eighteen years took power, it could not have been known or predicted that Britain would vote to Leave the European Union in a few short months' time. This event not only placed a spotlight on class – albeit in problematic ways – but also focused on the subject, who 'listen[s] to reactionary populist voices of the far right' as Standing anticipated.[608] Given the connection that this has made between the figure of the precariat, and this moment of financial crisis and Brexit, it can be speculated with hindsight how Val might have voted in the referendum. Val's historical

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[608] Standing, 'The Precariat and Class Struggle', p. 7.

class position is contested in the novel, which may say something about Coe's reluctance to represent the poor in his writing, but Val also fulfils the role of this sector of the precariat and points to texts that avoid focusing on traditional conceptions of class to suggest how class is being reconfigured. Cartwright's novel is, of course, an exception, but in the main, this thesis focuses on figures that fifteen years previously may have constituted the middle class under New Labour. This choice was deliberately taken to avoid overemphasis on a single section of the precariat. This choice may seem to confer a limitation, but ensures a balancing out of different character types in order to test the conceptual approach to an increasingly complex precariat.

This decision has also been taken because of the centrality of the precariat more recently, as not only the villain of Brexit, but also the class caricature *par excellence* – the old, white, male subject, the 'gammon', of contemporary British politics is now associated with neo-nationalist movements and with Brexit, as well as being held responsible for fuelling the rise of Donald Trump's successful campaign for U.S. president, Salvini's electoral success in Italy, Vox's rise in Spain, le Pen's success in France, AfD

in Germany, and that of other far-right movements across Europe and the developed world. Neo-nationalism harbours an odd relationship to neoliberalism. Both confirming and rejecting the nation state, neo-nationalism sees elected – or potential – leaders demand the tightening of borders, to ostensibly protect the indigenous working classes from competition in the labour market. It sees increased expansion of capital and the free flow of technology across borders. As *Exit West* suggests, nativist values increase in this context, but the free flow of elite culture can be observed to follow this tendency too. The opening of the Booker Prize to include American writers in 2014 is perhaps one indication, and Ewen's novel registers an endpoint for the Booker Prize's association with the British Commonwealth.

Shortlisted for the Booker in 2019, Lanchester's novel *The Wall* (2019) is a literary intervention into neo-nationalism for how it imagines a dystopic Britain where, significantly, one region looks out onto open water and in which a towering wall perimeters the territory as its border. The young of this representation of Britain are required to perform national service. Known as Defenders, they

must staff the wall for twelve-hour shifts over a two-week period; they are granted relief from the task, but soon return to the wall to take up their posts again. This obligation endures for a year, while the militaristic superiors to whom the Defenders report threaten them with extensions to their sentence should they fail to execute their role effectively. Their role, however, is straightforward: they must survey the waters for 'Others', intruders on the nation. The naming of these guards as 'Defenders' introduces the hyperbolic nationalist language that Ahmed investigates as discussed in Chapter Three where the nation is corporealized as a female and porous body which requires protection.[609] Defenders are conscripts, and the lowest-ranked soldiers in a hierarchy that includes Captains, Corporals, and Sergeants and recalls the militaristic policing practices that characterise Israel's occupation of the West Bank and, implicitly, ICE's (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) monitoring of the border between the U.S. and Mexico.

The Wall's erection is a double solution to the new right's racist neo-protectionism and the threat of climate change. An affair that predates the novel,

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[609] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, pp. 1-2.

'The Change' was a '"single solitary event" […] for Britons in which they "experienced one particular shift, of sea level and weather."'[610] Climate change provides a pretext for Britain's government to pursue racist neo-protectionist policy under the guise of national security as climate change makes much of the planet uninhabitable. In other places, the Change was a '"process"' that is still ongoing, reshaping landscapes and forcing people into perpetual nomadism as topographies are re-made, consumed, and destroyed.[611] As Kavanagh learns when speaking to Help (Others who have successfully breached the Wall and are in turn enslaved by the British state), the Change is 'Kuishia' in Swahili, meaning 'the ending.'[612] An uneven power relationship exists between Britons and Others who live in other parts of the world ravaged by climate change: Lanchester implies food and housing safety is always precarious in this terrifying world order.

Lanchester suggests however that young Britons conscripted to work as Defenders exist almost as insecurely as the Others. If Others successfully breach the Wall, the Defenders will collectively decide

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[610] John Lanchester, *The Wall* (Faber & Faber, 2019), p. 110.
[611] Lanchester, *The Wall*, p. 111.
[612] Lanchester, *The Wall*, p. 82.

who was most responsible. This person or persons will then be 'put to sea.'[613] For example, if five Others breach the Wall, five Defenders are put out to sea – and certain death. Guy Swift's predicament in *Transmission* when mistakenly deported, only to re-enter illegally and exist as a static and undocumented migrant, appears relatively tolerable in comparison. In the main, Defenders do not relish serving on the Wall and Kavanagh envisages the nightmare scenario in which he is put out to sea: 'Your old comrades pointing guns at you while you pushed your boat out into the water, the only feeling colder and lonelier and more final than being on the Wall.'[614] In Chapter Three, I argued that Arjun's technological intervention enabled a reformation in code, scrambling people's citizenship data ostensibly to progressive ends or, at least, showing how a stratified global system of rights is overestimated as stable and contingent. In *The Wall*, though, citizenship can literally be wrestled from the Defender if an Other breaches the rampart. In both texts, citizenship is reconfigured, but in *The Wall*, it is a blunt and deliberate condition written into the terms and conditions of being a Defender, rather than an

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[613] Lanchester, *The Wall*, p. 37.
[614] Lanchester, *The Wall*, p. 37.

accident of hacking. Lanchester presents a brutal equalising of Defenders and Others, whoever wins in this one-on-one struggle will ultimately win or retain the prize of British citizenship. As such, Defenders' citizenship is invariably contingent on keeping out Others. Lanchester presents a violent equalising of a global working class, with the British Defenders enjoying only a marginal advantage, which may be lost at any time.

In *The Wall*, the young Defenders who risk their lives and citizenship status 'defending' Britain's borders, maintain a hostile relationship with their parents. The 'olds' have a different experience and relationship to the Wall, the nation, and national security because the Wall did not exist when they were of conscription age. This means that, as Kavanaugh emphasises, 'the single most important and formative experience in the lives of my generation - the big thing we have in common - is something about which they have exactly no clue.'[615] Intergenerational relationships have completely broken down, and Kavanaugh suggests how he or someone of his generation might respond to a grandparent's intervention. 'Why don't you travel back in time and

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[615] Lanchester, *The Wall*, p. 55.

unfuckup the world and then travel back here and maybe then we can talk.'[616] Lanchester does not make clear whether the policy decision to build the Wall is sanctioned by an electorate, but it is clear that the young hold individual parents collectively accountable for the Change and the social contract that emerged from it. Lanchester suggests contemporary tensions between generations on electoralism, the environment and strong borders.

Lanchester introduces the notion of a 'monster' wall at a moment in global politics when it complicates neoliberalism's foundational commitment to the free movement of people, trade, and information.[617] The wall represents a – theoretically – unscalable barrier, designed to safeguard territories from unauthorised figures moving into them, and it also symbolises for its supporters, a return to local forms of profit-making, expresses a desire for a mythic mono-ethnic nation, and for a harnessing of, and return to traditional national cultures. As recent political events attest, however, the strengthening of borders is designed to restrict the free movement of people from the global

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[616] Lanchester, *The Wall*, p. 55.
[617] Lanchester, *The Wall*, p. 4.

south to the global north.[618] In addition, as trade wars emerge and are maintained on a global scale, and as Britain's divorce from the European Union threatens the strength of the pound and the ability to trade, these tenets of neoliberalism come under threat. At the same time, neoliberal economic principles – privatisation, the privileging of the free market to resolve social and economic status, and individual liberty – are only expected to intensify in this neo-protectionist future.[619]

Moreover, the title of Lanchester's novel evokes the proliferation of discourse around the securitisation of borders over the last two years. Perhaps most notably, the wall evokes Donald Trump's plans to erect such a structure across the U.S.-Mexico border. Fears of invasion have been compounded in this period with the narrative of the mythical caravan of migrants from Central America

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[618] Ben Jacobs, 'Trump threatens to close border with Mexico', *Guardian*, 29 March 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/mar/29/donald-trump-threatens-close-mexico-border> [accessed 13 August 2019]; Deborah Benello, 'Trump's border policy takes its toll on Mexico where migrant caravans are turned away by overwhelmed locals', *Telegraph*, 31 May 2019, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/trumps-border-policy-takes-toll-mexico-migrant-caravans-turned/> [accessed 13 August 2019].
[619] Sarah Neville, 'Could the NHS be part of a US-UK trade deal?', *Financial Times*, 5 June 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/7795cb64-877d-11e9-97ea-05ac2431f453> [accessed 13 August 2019].

seeking to breach the border constituting a key element of Trump's strategy to mobilise the vote in the 2018 mid-term elections.[620] A similar scenario has unfolded in Britain. Whilst no such proposal for the erection of a wall has been forwarded, partly because the English Channel serves a similar function, focus on the free movement of people from the European Union has been a key component of public discourse since the 2016 referendum.[621] The political proponents of neoliberalism are thus confronted with the challenge of how to negotiate neoliberalism's economic ideas alongside the cultural drive to bolster security at the border. This challenge complicates neoliberal economic ideas that rely on cheap labour from overseas.

Indeed, politicians offering such neo-protectionist policy proposals do so to justify restricting migrants' entry into the respective nation states they (seek to) represent. Trump is perhaps the most glaring example, but Theresa May's 'hostile environment' policy, discussed in Chapter Four, as well as the proposals Nigel Farage has made outside

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[620] Ann Deslandes, 'The migrant caravan was born of calamity', *Eureka Street*, 28.24 (2018), 93-95.

[621] Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever, 'Racism, Crisis, Brexit', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41.10 (2018), 1802-1819.

of public office, also follow this line of argument. If such a route is pursued, they claim, a smorgasbord of jobs will be made available for the working classes. But as Wolfgang Streeck notes, such an approach will not deliver on these promises: 'even a post-globalist, neo-protectionist policy of the kind envisaged by Trump and May would be unable to guarantee stable growth, more and better quality employment, a deleveraging of public and private debt, or trust in the dollar or euro'.[622] The crisis of neoliberalism is located precisely in its unruly impulsive movements: 'The financialized crisis of capitalism of the present is no more governable nationally from below than internationally from above.'[623] Neoliberalism cannot be managed by governments nor supranational institutions, Streeck contends, and for as long as inequality remains pronounced, there is no indication that the unpleasantness attached to aspects of populism and inequality will subside.

If Paul Mason's provocative observation that capitalism has lost its ability to adapt is true, then what consequence will it have for the novel? Lanchester provides a hint. As Kavanagh reports, a

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[622] Wolfgang Streeck, 'The Return of the Repressed', trans. by Rodney Livingstone, *NLR*, 104 (2017), 5-18, (p. 16).
[623] Streeck, 'The Return of the Repressed', p. 16.

profound alienation is constitutive of his role: 'It was the same as when I'd arrived only the day before, though that fact – that it was only twenty-four hours since I had walked into this room – made no sense. It felt more like twenty-four years.'[624] Moments later, he confirms this sense: 'On the Wall, one day is every day.' [625] The novel that responds to neoliberalism may continue to reflect the cultural and political paralysis explored in Cartwright's and Smith's texts, but these novels also incorporate, I have argued, a degree of movement within them. Lanchester, however, seems to confirm an immobile impermanence that is attached to the securing and maintenance of borders.

Lanchester reflects an immobile impermanence in the novel's structure. By separating the novel into three sections - 'The Wall', 'The Others', 'The Sea' - Lanchester initially implies that the narrative develops progressively, in the manner of a bildungsroman which I argued was a preoccupation of Ben Masters' *Noughties* in Chapter Two. Unlike Masters' novel, the narrative development of *The Wall* steers the reader through

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[624] Lanchester, *The Wall*, p. 42.
[625] Lanchester, p. 43.

seemingly perpetual insecurity: as Defenders, Kavanaugh and his troop's citizenship status is always under threat of removal; on the Sea, they must always watch out for both the West's imperialist ships and pirates which look to eliminate small boats, who supposedly pose a threat to their way of life, or murder their occupant and pillage them for their contents. In this way, Kavanagh is always a Defender, holding onto what little security - food, safety, and companionship - he has. Although they move across the sea in search of safety, their security is always unchanging and static: they are always one storm, confrontation or disaster away from death. In this sense, working for their insecurity, *The Wall* presents a similar lived experience as presented by Ewen in *How To Be A Public Author*, yet in Lanchester we see the aspirational desire for social, economic and cultural betterment is all but impossible: survival is the ambition, at first as a British citizen, and second, on the open waters of the world's oceans.

Plug's optimistic belief in a social, cultural and economic upward trajectory is contrasted by Lanchester's novel as the ending makes clear. Finally, in the safety of a watchtower in the middle of

the ocean, Hifa asks Kavanaugh to tell her a story and he aims to turn to one in which 'everything turns out all right.'[626] Hifa rejects this concept, and Kavanagh instead announces that another thing a story can be is 'something somebody wants to hear.'[627] He is not sure that Hifa wants to hear this, either, and instead focuses on a story where everything turns out all right. His story borrows the sentence that begins the novel: '"It's cold on the Wall."'[628] It is the beginning and the ending - or *Kuishia*. What should readers make of this ending? The novel effectively ties itself in a knot, so the narrative development ultimately returns the reader to the beginning in a cyclical movement. Moreover, Lanchester suggests that a story in which the world's ecosystem has collapsed, many millions are presumed dead because of a violently changing environment, state-sanctioned slavery has returned, and a brutal authoritarianism that terrorises the world's inhabitants is a story that has turned out all right. Indeed, suggesting that the few characters who survive make life on an almost abandoned rig with a limited food supply as a story with a happy ending is a stretch. This suggestion of a

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[626] Lanchester, *The Wall*, p. 276.
[627] Lanchester, *The Wall*, p. 276.
[628] Lanchester, *The Wall*, p. 276.

cycle in which everything happens, again and again, is captured in Ali Smith's seasonal quartet, which I discussed in part in Chapter Five; it also implies that political unrest - the emergence of neo-fascism - is also a cyclical event, which explains Trump's win and for some, Brexit. One area to which we may look that is interesting to see presently is the English rural novel which can be seen to be making a comeback. Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land* (2017), for example, deals with an impending divorce, the cause of which is an infidelity traceable to the 2008 economic crisis. Unable to afford the privileged life of London, the family rents out its home, moves to Devon and lives in a modest cottage. Deindustrialisation, low-paid labour, and diminished workers' rights in a food production factory are key features; economic inequality and racism are represented as having a complex and intersecting motivating dynamic for causing the locals to vote for Brexit. Indeed, the novel's title indicates a conservatism: the 'lie of the land' implies the way things are, as well as evoking England's iconic and verdant topography. Conjuring an 'ideal' England of the past that we saw in 'The Crystal Garden' in Coe's *Number 11*, Craig's novel transplants rural nostalgia

into contemporary life as economic and racial anxieties for Britain's rural poor. The divorce that drags out throughout the novel's 600 pages is also the slow economic and political unravelling of Britain's relationship with Europe. And the 'lie of the land' is what critics of Brexit allege illegitimately drove Leave. Other titles more explicitly delve into the past. Fiona Mozley's *Elmet* (2017), Tim Pears' West Country Trilogy (2017-2019) and Melissa Harrison's *All Among the Barley* (2018) return to England in the 1910s and 1930s.[629] Following the lives of children, Pears and Harrison centre innocence as the entry point to their novels, implying at once the naïve perspective through which a return to an imagined, rural and white England of the past fails to account for the socially progressive values of the present.

While *The Wall* is arguably a novel about a return to a past with which its characters feel comfortable, it also carves out space to consider what the concerns of novels about class after Brexit may be. One, more optimistic future that the novel depicts is the potential for internationalism after the brutal

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[629] Fiona Mozley, *Elmet* (London: John Murray, 2017); Tim Pears, *The Horseman* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Tim Pears, *The Wanderers* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Tim Pears, *The Redeemed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019); Melissa Harrison, *All Among the Barley* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018.

force of the state has entirely alienated its workers. Once put to sea and settled on an island of rafts, Kavanaugh rejects the term 'Others' and sees himself as part of a global class of subjects:

> I'd been brought up not to think about the Others in terms of where they came from or who they were, to ignore all that - they were just Others. But maybe, not that I was one of them, they weren't Others any more? If I was an Other and they were Others perhaps none of us were Others but instead we were a new US.[630]

British citizens are encouraged to elide economic, social, cultural, political, and environmental differences and understand them as a homogenous mass of adversaries. Kavanaugh begins to understand this dichotomy between Britons and Others as a construct and that Others may be on the same side. For example, the new community hunts for food together and shares caring responsibilities. As such, the precarious, yet sustainable, community is constituted of the world's citizens, the indigenous inhabitants welcoming them, despite knowing about their previous work as Defenders. This is a far cry from Lanchester's *Capital*, where a community representing the world works collaboratively rather than always wishing to amass wealth at their expense.

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[630] Lanchester, *The Wall*, p. 203.

In *The Wall*, Lanchester identifies the potential for forms of internationalism, even in a moment of hyper-nationalism. Although Kavanaugh only comes to this new-found form of solidarity after he is forced from Britain, Lanchester nonetheless indicates that such relationships are essential for survival when the state hands out brutal punishments, and that the conditions Kavanaugh's situation produces necessitate global solidarities among workers.

The community's disbandment by a ship of pirates means that the temporary respite is short-lived and Lanchester turns instead to nostalgia to indicate how the novel may offer meaningful narratives for the working classes after Brexit. As *The Wall* approaches its conclusion, Kavanaugh and Hifa find sanctuary in an almost abandoned oil rig, where the novel ends, and they delight in the discovery of an oil lamp because of the nostalgic sentiment it produces in them:

> It was oil. I wanted to shout, oil, oil, oil! Light and heat. In that moment I realised something. I had internalised the idea that I would never again have heat - would never have control of them, would never be able to make it bright or make it warm, just by deciding that's what I wanted. An ordinary miracle, a thing we had dozens, maybe hundreds a day all our lives

before the sea, and which had then gone away for ever, and how had come back.[631]

Kavanaugh's excitement over oil is motivated by a desire to meet his material needs in the present but it also functions as a powerful nostalgic symbol for both him and for readers. The oil lamp provides long-forgotten heat and comfort. It also symbolises how everyday commodities are now a luxury in this hellish future. The oil lamp gives and sustains life. *The Wall* makes clear, however, that this supply of oil is finite and will eventually expire, so Kavanaugh is also enamoured with it because of its symbolic association with the past. In this way, it evokes an idea of Britain: safety, life, and security with all his material needs for survival met. For readers, the symbol of oil is easily associated with oil as a central and unsustainable source of energy - and incidentally, a major polluter and contributor to the climate crisis - of the novel's past that is the reader's present. Lanchester invites the reader to question the nostalgia *The Wall* perversely celebrates.

It is tempting to speculate about what the direction of the novel in Britain will be after Brexit. It is especially enticing to do so given that mere

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[631] Lanchester, *The Wall*, p. 260.

months after *The Wall* was published, Boris Johnson won an astonishing landslide victory in the general election of December 2019 for the Conservative Party on an unequivocal message - 'get Brexit done' - of harder borders. The appearance of novels that focus on the rural and that celebrate an idealised 1950s, monoethnic England may indicate one direction in which literary fiction is headed. On another level, Johnson's victory, in addition to the decision to leave the European Union, also indicates a rejection of the neoliberal arrangement. Facilitated by the coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing global economic collapse, Johnson's victory may result in levels of state spending to stimulate local economies and communities.[632] Despite this indication, a meaningful reversal of neoliberalism is not inevitable, however. As Aaron Bastani notes in his optimistic 'manifesto', *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* (2019), the architecture of capitalism will require class struggle if it is to be wrestled away from power to the working classes. Channelling Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, Bastani concludes his treatise by acknowledging, as

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[632] Chris Giles, 'Boris Johnson to spend £100bn on cementing his red wall', *Financial Times*, 17 December 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/1511ef22-201b-11ea-b8a1-584213ee7b2b> [accessed 18 December 2019].

Lanchester does, that the future is not inevitable but rather is made now. 'This is not a book about the future,' Bastani writes,

> but about a present that goes unacknowledged. The outline of a world immeasurably better than our own, more equal, prosperous, and creative, is there to see if only we dare to look. But insight alone is not enough. We must have the courage - for that is what is required - to argue, persuade, and build. There is a world to win.[633]

The novel must play its part to argue, persuade, and build a better world than the one Lanchester presents. It means forms of literary production that offer an optimistic vision of what the world might be, one in which worker and environmental justice are presented as possible, in which internationalism and solidarity with workers across borders are manifest, in which young people are centred as the agents of change, and in which local forms of working-class culture may also be celebrated alongside more transformative representations. Although this thesis has focused on exploitation, the characters depicted are also and precisely the symbolic figures of a pro-worker future, which the novel in Britain must focus. The novel about class in Britain must also resist ideas of parochial Englishness and remain committed to ideas of class

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[633] Aaron Bastani, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2019), p. 243.

whereby assets owned by capital are transferred to workers so that they are socially useful. The novel must also represent the 'working class' as it is and is set to be: diverse. The novel of class in Britain in the future will be determined by the present, and Lanchester's novel is an important reminder to be nostalgic about the present. The answer to Standing's refrain - 'when will the precariat protest' - is surely: now.

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