4. Money, Abstraction, Cultural Production: *John Henry Days* and *Apex Hides the Hurt* Revisited

This chapter turns once more to *John Henry Days* and *Apex Hides the Hurt*, two novels that are in fact deeply engaged in parsing the monstrosities of capitalist society. However, whereas *Sag Harbor* mostly represents processes of social reproduction as they occur on the surface of class society, Whitehead's previous two novels dig deeper, as it were, and interrogate how cultural production fares under the spell of the commodity form. Again, the novels are strikingly similar. While chapter two discussed their tales of urban black professionals who must confront Reconstruction-era history on their travels to non-metropolitan regions of the United States, this chapter looks at the two protagonists as participants in fields of cultural production: freelance journalism and "nomenclature" consultation. Both J. Sutter and the nameless "nomenclature consultant" of *Apex* do things with words: the former writes puff pieces for whoever pays; the latter thinks up names for products. That is to say, they both use words to sell commodities; or, more precisely, they use words to convince people to buy commodities. Drawing loosely on Lukács's path-breaking assertion that all problems that arise in the totality of capitalist society "lead back" to "the riddle of the commodity-*structure*,"[1] I will argue that Whitehead's novels provide sophisticated

1 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT P, 1971), 83, emphasis in original.

representations of how value and its forms—most notably, the money form—encroach upon the forms of thought available to participants in capitalist society. Value's abstraction from an object's particular qualities in the service of commensurability, however, does not just affect the novels' protagonists' relationship to their creative faculties. More than that, their ability to relate to other human beings as well as to nonhuman nature suffers in Whitehead's novelistic reflections on damaged life.[2]

Mercenaries in the Marketplace

In the world of *John Henry Days*, almost all social interactions are shaped the principle of competition. On the plane taking him to Charleston, the narrator relates a comically petty contest between J. and a fellow passenger. Since J. the character whose perspective is privileged in this passage, the narrator's words reproduce J.'s schemes of perception and appreciation. Thus, as Whitehead writes, the woman sitting next to J.

> wins the first round by lifting the armrest that divides her seat and the middle seat into discreet [sic] pens. She folds her jacket in half and pats it down in the empty seat. Beats him to it. J. tells himself to wake

2 The protagonists' "alienation" is often noted. Preston Park Cooper, *Playing With Expectations: Postmodern Narrative Choices and the African American Novel* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 143. Usually, critical accounts focus on the commercialization of culture. For example: J. is "enmeshed in a material, superficial, and fleeting culture" (Derek C. Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead: Revised and Expanded Edition*, Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2021, 44); he illustrates "postmodern man's being enmeshed in the virtual cyber-realities of a technological world" (William Ramsey, "An End of Southern History: The Down-Home Quests of Toni Morrison and Colson Whitehead," *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 783); or life is defined by "pop" (Michael K. Walonen, "'This Making of Truth is Violence Too, Out of Which Facts Are Formed': Colson Whitehead's Secret History of Post-Reconstruction America in *John Henry Days*," *Literature & History* 23, no. 2 (2014): 75). This chapter offers a reading of Whitehead's two novels which underlines that they have a more precise understanding of what it means to say that culture has been transformed by commerce.

> up. He is going to need all of his skills this weekend; this woman is a civilian, a minnow compared to all those other pilot fish he'll be competing with over the next few days. (*JHD* 12)[3]

J. reminds himself to be on guard, that is, to be a good neoliberal competitive subject.[4] At the same time, his metaphorical substitution of his human competitors with species of fish indicates that he naturalizes the state of permanent competition. When his seatmate puts her leftovers on the middle seat's tray, J. regards this as a show of military strength: "Sending the gunboats to Cuba" (*JHD* 13). Now warfare serves as the vehicle for a metaphor identifying interpersonal relations with warfare.

As a matter of fact, military metaphors permeate all parts of *John Henry Days* concerned with J. and his fellow journalists, much to the chagrin of James Wood, who called for an "armistice on the war metaphors."[5]

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3 All references to Colson Whitehead, *John Henry Days* (New York: Doubleday, 2001) will hereafter be cited parenthetically in the text as *JHD*.

4 Studies of neoliberal subjectivation often draw on Michel Foucault. See, for instance, Foucault's February 7, 1979, lecture in *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); see also the account of *homo oeconomicus* as a competitive subject in Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2015); and Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neo-Liberal Society*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London/New York: Verso, 2014). Here I am not particularly interested in in-depth discussions of the genesis of neoliberal subjectivity. Some accounts of neoliberalism read as if they merely register with horror that the economic principles that always already characterized capitalism begin to affect "the lives of a group—white, educated, upper middle-class citizens of the developed world—formerly protected from them," as Annie McClanahan puts it in a trenchant review of Brown's book. "Becoming Non-Economic: Human Capital Theory and Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos*," *Theory & Event* 20, no. 2 (2017): 512. I use the term neoliberalism, thus, merely to refer to the period after c. 1980 without thereby implying that it constitutes an essential transformation of the capitalist mode of production.

5 James Wood, "Virtual Prose," review of *John Henry Days*, by Colson Whitehead, The *New Republic*, August 6, 2001: 30.

The critic's taunt misses the significance of the trope of warfare in Whitehead's novel, however. More than a mere rhetorical flourish, it expresses the principle governing a society in which competitive behavior has become second nature. The novel's controlling metaphor is that of the mercenary, which is the name the freelancers have given themselves. Their self-designation shows they regard their work as a service to be sold to the highest bidder. Using a less martial analogy, Lucien, the man behind the mysterious "List" that seems to determine the mercenaries' fate, is reminded of "day workers who crowded the farmer's truck every morning for pennywork" when he thinks of them (*JHD* 297). He declares the truth of their line of work's precarity. They suffer from "insecure working and living conditions" which allows for their "flexploitation."[6] But flexible employment, far from figuring as a means of escaping the drudgery of old, underlies the introduction of extreme existential insecurity in the mercenaries' lives.

Yet J. perversely immerses himself in this precarity, even going so far as to hand over control of his basic reproductive needs to the market. The journalists euphemistically discuss how J. is "going for the record" by exclusively eating and drinking at publicity events, thus avoiding paying for a single meal. When J. arrives in West Virginia, he has been on this "jag" for three months already (*JHD* 29). His surrender of the power to eat on his own schedule means that his very existence has become entirely contingent on the decisions of publicists who schedule press junkets. Under capitalism the nearly all human beings are separated from the means to secure their own reproduction, which is why they are dependent on the owners of the means of production to pay them a wage in exchange for the sale of their labor-power.[7] The wage mediates be-

6 Marianne Pieper, "Prekarisierung, symbolische Gewalt und produktive Subjektivierung im Feld immaterieller Arbeit," in *Symbolische Gewalt: Herrschaftsanalyse nach Pierre Bourdieu*, ed. Robert Schmidt and Volker Woltersdorff (Konstanz: UVK, 2008), 219, my translations.

7 I paraphrase Søren Mau's recent discussion of the proletarian condition in *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital* (London/New York: Verso, 2023).

tween work and reproduction because it provides a means to purchase the means of subsistence. As a freelance journalist, however, J. does not receive a regular wage; he only writes about few of the events to which he is sent by Lucien's "List" (discussed below) and mostly just enjoys the free food. In the absence of a wage, work (going to events) tends to become identical with reproduction (consumption of food). By allowing the List to decide when, where, and what to consume, J. willingly subjects his existence to an abstract social force.

The List is a figurative device that makes capitalism's peculiar form of abstract social domination narratable. Indeed, frequently characters speak of the List as if it possessed its own agency, and one of the novel's innumerable short chapters does in fact feature the List as a protagonist. By transforming the List from a mute object into a subject with "a will and a function" (*JHD* 55), the novel uses a trope Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle call "materialist prosopopoeia," which dramatizes abstract social forms that "determine, in generally overpowering ways, the actions of individuals and collectives."[8] J. has submitted to the List's power and, even more, seems to emphatically welcome the determination by abstract social force when he actively goes for the record. Bourdieu's notion of "*amor fati*" accurately captures this embrace of a social "destiny."[9] As Christa Buschendorf elaborates, in Bourdieu's hands the concept transforms the "force which in ancient tragedy is called fate" into an effect of social relations.[10] In this sense, the List is as capricious as a Greek God; yet, it

8 Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015), 43. That is also to say, the novel is not interested in the agency of nonhuman entities as such à la New Materialism; for a critique of the latter's notion of agency, see Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London/New York: Verso, 2018).

9 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 50.

10 Christa Buschendorf, "Narrated Power Relations: Jesse Hill Ford's Novel *The Liberation of Lord Byron Jones*," in *Civilizing and Decivilizing Processes: Figurational Approaches to American Culture*, ed. Christa Buschendorf, Astrid Franke, and Johannes Voelz (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 247.

is nothing but a symbol of the abstract domination that individuals are subjected to in capitalist society.[11]

John Henry Days uses figures of speech and rhetorical devices to give literary form to the power of markets; it also grants the reader insight into J.'s subjective experience of capital's abstract domination. As a mercenary whose very existence has become dependent on the List's whims, his sense of the spatio-temporal distinction between work and life collapses. Because he has neither a regular work schedule nor any stable workplace, he is potentially always working everywhere. To be sure, he is not engaged in work-related activities 24/7. The novel explains how he goes about writing an article. The first thing he does is go on a walk; later he watches television. This continues "until eleven o'clock, when the faint angel of professionalism perched on his shoulder" whispers, and he starts to write (*JHD* 302). J. no longer needs an external "temporal discipline,"[12] since he has thoroughly "internalized" the habits demanded by flexible neoliberal working conditions.[13] Today's cultural workers, writes Maurizio Lazzarato, have to be "active subjects" who are "responsible for [their] own control and motivation."[14] The novel uses the metaphor of the "faint angel of professionalism" to show how J.'s embodied dispositions—the angel is seated on his shoulder, after all—actively serve to remind him that work needs to be done regardless of any circadian rhythm.

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11 On abstract domination, see Mau, *Mute Compulsion*; Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003); William Clare Roberts, *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of* Capital (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2017).

12 David Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity: An Enquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 228.

13 Astrid Franke, "'The Death of the Sixties?' Afroamerikanische Geschichte in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*," in *Von Selma bis Ferguson – Rasse und Rassismus in den USA*, ed. Michael Butter, Astrid Franke, and Horst Tonn (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016), 171, my translation.

14 Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," trans. Paul Colilli and Ed Emery, in *Contemporary Marxist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Andrew Pendakis et al. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 80.

And yet, the demands introduced by the neoliberal spatiotemporal regime have been emphatically welcomed by some. The sociologist Richard Florida, for instance, celebrated the so-called "creative class" in a bestseller which was published only shortly after *John Henry Days*. He begins by assuming the perspective of a fictional visitor from the past who is surprised that people are "always working and yet never working when they were supposed to."[15] According to Florida, humans are naturally bearers of creativity which they like to put to work in the service of perpetual innovation. The latter, he stresses, can be a "*decisive* source of competitive advantage."[16] The sociologist thus gives his game away: competition is the principle organizing the social world. Moreover, there is no tension between economic pressures, such as the ones exerted by the wage-relation, and creative labor in Florida's eyes.[17] Ultimately, he believes that "new ideas, new technologies, and/or new creative content" can bring about a liberation of a potential previously stifled.[18]

John Henry Days is much less sanguine about the value of "content." J. Sutter, for one, thinks that it "sounds so honest. Not stories, not articles, but content" (*JHD* 21). In the final section of this chapter I will argue that the challenge J. has to overcome in the novel's plot—though the outcome remains uncertain—is to cease producing content and start writing stories. Here I want to highlight that the novel goes on to satirize the notion of cultural production reduced to content creation by way of the journalists' heated discussion of what the narrator calls the "Anatomy of Puff":

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15 Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class. And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 3. Florida has since retreated from his earlier celebratory account; see Sam Wetherell, "Richard Florida is Sorry," *Jacobin*, August 19, 2017, https://jacobin.com/2017/08/new-urban-crisis-review-richard-florida.

16 Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, 5, emphasis in original.

17 See Sarah Brouillette, "Creative Labor," in *Contemporary Marxist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Andrew Pendakis et al. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 443.

18 Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, 8.

> [W]hile all puff is tied by a golden cord to a subject, be it animal, vegetable or mineral, the pop expression of that subject can be reduced to three discrete schools of puff. For the sake of clarity, the Bull [the journalist who established the system, that is] christened the archetypal subject Bob, and named the three essential manifestations of Bob as follows: Bob's Debut, Bob's Return, and Bob's Comeback.[19] Each manifestation commanded its own distinct stock phrases and hyperbolic rhetoric. (*JHD* 70)

The point of "puff," a term for the formalization of journalistic practices shaped to the demands of the market, is to offer fixed forms under which each possible subject can be subsumed. The puff piece is an "ossified" (*JHD* 73) or reified manifestation of an eternally returning same. "Bob," thus, fulfills the role of the "schema" in Horkheimer and Adorno's account of the culture industry.

> The active contribution which Kantian schematism still expected of subjects—that they should […] relate sensuous multiplicity to fundamental concepts—is denied to the subject by industry. It purveys schematism as its first service to the customer. […]. For the consumer there is nothing left to classify, since the classification has already been preempted by the schematism of production.[20]

The Frankfurt School Critical Theorists bemoaned the impoverishment of experience that occurred when the consumer of culture industry products passively received preformed—or deformed, as it were—articles. However, *John Henry Days* is less interested in the consumer's experience; instead, it reveals the journalists' self-conception or, in other words, the

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19 The elaboration on the three versions of Bob that follows in the novel suggests that the career of Bob Dylan could have provided their template. Yet, Whitehead could also have in mind Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq.," an earlier satire of writing for pay which revolves around a whimsical poem devoted to the "Oil-of-Bob." In *Edgar Allan Poe: Sixty-Seven Tales* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1990).

20 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002), 98.

"generative principle" of their work, their "*modus operandi*."[21] By pounding any subject—"animal, vegetable or mineral"—into a schema, they abstract from everything that cannot be subsumed under a version of "Bob," a category Kant did not anticipate.

Field Work

John Henry Days, thus, reveals "content" as the product of an operation of abstraction that turns the multiplicity of subjects into a strictly delimited set of potential templates able to subsume everything without doing justice to anything. This is the state of the journalistic field as satirized by Whitehead's novel. But it also goes on to narrate an episode in the transformation of a field that used to be protected from the market's imperatives into one governed by money. That is, the novel combines synchronic and diachronic perspectives on the social universe in which the freelance journalists move. Again, it relies on J.'s perspective to show how these objective shifts in the structure of the field were subjectively experienced, thus insisting on a materialist explanation for J.'s feeling of "alienation."[22] To wit, *John Henry Days* extensively employs a series of martial metaphors as vehicles for representing a world dominated by the principle of economic competition. That no social sphere is secure from being, thus, turned into a battlefield, as it were, is similarly highlighted by way of metaphor. The "war was peculiar. It would not end, it discovered new markets every day, the fighting spilled over into new demographics each day, none could remain neutral" (*JHD* 225). In fact, J. had experienced such a spillover himself as an apprentice journalist.

Like many other sociologists, Bourdieu regards modern society to be differentiated into spheres which are, at least in theory, relatively autonomous, which he calls fields. There is a key distinction to be made, though, as I have indicated in the introduction. According to Bourdieu,

21 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990), 12.

22 Cooper, *Playing With Expectations*, 143.

there are fields in which power and resources can be openly pursued and others in which social agents' actions must appear disinterested. The field of journalism, ideally, is an instance of the latter category. An outsider might believe that the self-conception of journalists has something to do with objectively revealing truths about society, that is, without being motivated by an interest in material profits. To be sure, further differentiation into various sub-fields of the journalistic field might yield counterexamples.[23] By and large, however, the field seems to be an "economic world reversed,"[24] whose participants do not adhere to the logic of the market.

It is precisely this belief that J. clings to when he first enters the journalistic field as an intern; by way of juxtaposing his youthful idealism (or naïveté) with the detached attitude toward his work he later exhibits, *John Henry Days* is able to shed light on the way the objective transformation of social structures affects subjective practices through the mediation of the habitus. That is to say, Whitehead's novel refuses to naturalize present-day J.'s attitude, but rather reveals it to be the determinate product of the incursion of the logic of the market economy into the journalistic field. His transformation—or, more precisely, his adaptation to the field's reconfiguration—is narrated in a non-chronological manner; that is, readers first encounter a middle-aged J. who is already, in his own words, a "jaded fuck" (*JHD* 22). The disillusioning process of entering a field in flux only comes 150 pages later. Readers thus need to

23 For a discussion of television and the constraints experienced by cultural producers in this sub-field which lead to the homogenization and depoliticization of the news, see Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (New York: The New Press, 1998); for Bourdieusian analyses of the journalistic field, see the essays in Rodney Benson and Erik Neveu, eds., *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005). For an account of the internal differentiation of fields of cultural production into relatively autonomous and relatively heteronomous spheres, see Pierre Bourdieu, "The Market of Symbolic Goods," trans. R. Swyer, in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia UP, 1993).

24 Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, trans. Randal Johnson et al. (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 110.

retroactively reevaluate J.'s behavior and relate it to the socio-economic processes described only subsequently in order to reconstruct the genesis of J.'s habitus.

In the later chapter, seventeen-year-old J. has just started interning at the *Downtown News*, a not-too-subtly disguised version of the *Village Voice*, for which Whitehead himself used to write after graduating college.[25] As a young man, J. is not at all jaded but passionately interested in politics, as a conversation with his parents concerning the police killings of Eleanor Bumpurs and Michael Stewart illustrates.[26] J. anticipates more recent terms used at anti-police protests when he denounces a "police state" in which "black people don't matter" (*JHD* 174). However, his middle-class parents remain unperturbed, which reinforces J.'s desire to become a journalist to tell the "real stories" that matter (*JHD* 175). He is not interested in what the novel calls "content," that is, prepackaged narratives to be sold to unthinking audiences; he wants meaningful stories. J. thus possesses what Bourdieu calls "*illusio*" or a "fundamental belief in the interest of the game."[27] J. feels being a journalist is a worthwhile endeavor precisely because it allows him to speak truth to power.

A lay sociologist in his own right, J. distinguishes between two positions in the journalistic field: "the papers his parents read," such as the *New York Times* (*JHD* 171), and counterhegemonic publications such as the *Downtown News*. After having read of the Bumpurs killing in the former, he informs his new boss so that their paper can present a more truthful rendering of the event.[28] Having done so, he feels pride.

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25 See Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 3.

26 On the killings of Bumpurs, a mentally unstable black woman who was shot during an eviction, and Stewart, a graffiti artist who died after having been beaten in custody, see Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (London: Ebury Press, 2007), 194–98.

27 Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 11.

28 The *New York Times* published a brief report the day after the shooting, which mostly relies on statements of the police officers involved. See Leonard Buder, "Police Kill Woman Being Evicted; Officers Say She Wielded a Knife," *The New*

> J. felt he had discovered the outrage for the paper, he had contributed his first thing to the *Downtown News*. […]. This was the kind of work he wanted to do, J. thought […]. J. felt part of the Bumpurs piece, he had turned Kramer [his boss] on to it, and though it was a small step it was his first, and that's how you learned to walk. (*JHD* 174–75)

And, indeed, J. learns to walk, but not in the manner he anticipated.

The mood of the chapter is entirely one of disappointment. Its first sentence, delivered in free indirect discourse but through J.'s perspective reads: "Every day in that place reduced his notions" (*JHD* 169). This is because he experiences the offices of the newspaper, which he imagined to be a hotbed of countercultural radicals, as "[d]ownright corporate" (*JHD* 172). This atmosphere is the product of the paper's purchase by a liquor company, which forced them to move into a new building; in short, it is a result of the influx of corporate money into independent publishing. The biggest disappointment comes, however, when J. attends an editorial meeting on the Bumpurs article. The meeting is almost entirely reproduced in direct speech as the editors shout possible headlines, each one more sensationalistic than the last. What J. discovers—and what proves a disenchanting experience—is that the writers he reveres seem not to care about the "real" story of Eleanor Bumpurs but only about "keep[ing] the newspaper's audience angry, and thus buying," as one critic phrases it.[29] As with the iterations of "Bob," the proposed headlines—some of which repeat the titles of well-known novels or essays such as "The Executioner's Song," "In Cold Blood," or "The Fire This Time" (*JHD* 178)—merely subordinate the event to a preconceived but empty form. *John Henry Days* then reinforces J.'s shock on the formal level. After almost all of the chapter is told exclusively through J.'s perspective, it ends with a line directly spoken by one of the editors without giving the reader any glimpse of

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York Times, October 30, 1984, https://www.nytimes.com/1984/10/30/nyregion/police-kill-woman-being-evicted-officers-say-she-wielded-a-knife.html.

29 Peter Collins, "The Ghosts of Economics Past: *John Henry Days* and the Production of History," *African American Review* 46, no. 2–3 (2013), 293.

what goes through J. mind. The experience of disillusionment—the discovery that his "*illusio*," his belief in the significance of the field, was misplaced—leaves him stunned.

x Words = y Dollars, or, a Value-Form Theoretical Excursus

Through its use of figures of speech, such as the controlling metaphor of the "mercenary" and related military metaphors, *John Henry Days* reflects the freelance journalists' subjective experience of their work; effecting the kind of "epistemological break" with primary experience discussed in the previous chapter,[30] the novel's non-chronological presentation of events shows that their disaffection, their jadedness, is a function of objective transformations of the field's structure. Here, I will go further and argue that Whitehead's novel shows J.'s activity as a writer is affected by the mediations that traverse capitalist society at the deepest level—that is, the logic of value and its appearance in the form of money. It goes further, in other words, than suggesting that writers feel jaded when they realize that they are only in it for the money; nor does it merely tell a tale of the market's incursion into other social spheres. Rather, *John Henry Days* traces how the value-form affects the meaning of the written word itself and ends up concluding that, stripped of meaning by value's abstraction, what is written for money amounts to excrement.

The reader does not find out too much about what happened to J. between 1984 and 1996, but it is easy to see that he has adapted well to the demands of the marketplace; so much so, in fact, that he explicitly thinks of his work in purely monetary terms. On the plane to West Virginia J. reflects on his line of work and reveals the generative principle which informs his writing habits: "J. feels he works more efficiently if he does not think of his audience […]. He likes to keep his obligations to meeting the word count, a number readily verified by a feature on a pulldown menu of his word processing program" (*JHD* 12). The point of writing for J. is not—or is no longer, as the chapter on his reaction to the Eleanor

30 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 26.

Bumpurs killing shows—to write "real stories" that are relevant to real audiences; instead, he merely feels obliged to producing the number of words demanded by the publication that pays him, a number that translates into a sum of money at the rate of, say, "two dollars a word" (*JHD* 13).

That is, J. freely admits that he has material interests and thus ignores the "taboo of making things explicit" that normally holds sway over fields of cultural production.[31] Instead, he willingly acts as a participant in an "economic economy" which, according to Bourdieu, is a "type of game, whose principle is the law of material interest" so that "the law of exchange of exact equivalents becomes the explicit rule."[32] Despite providing a powerful account of the ways in which habitus—embodied dispositions—mediate between structure and practice; and despite its significant contribution to an understanding of the reproduction of relations of domination through the theory of symbolic violence, Bourdieu's sociology is comparatively weak when it comes to grasping the significance of the exchange of equivalents. This is because it treats money as a form of economic capital, "as a resource (that is, a form of wealth) which yields power," but not as a "form of mediation."[33] To highlight what is at stake when human activities are mediated by money—for instance, by

31 Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, 110.

32 Ibid., 105.

33 Craig Calhoun, "Habitus, Field, and Capital: The Question of Historical Specificity," in *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Edward LiPuma, and Moishe Postone (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1993), 69, 84. In Bourdieu's writings, money functions as economic capital which is used to "directly acquire" goods. *Pierre Bourdieu, Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 241. At the same time, it is the "goal" of economic activity. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 117. Finally, it can serve as a "naked force" which enables its possessor to wield power over others. Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 172. These functions correspond to money's use as means of circulation, its role in the process of capital accumulation, and its materialization of "universal social power." Karl Marx, "The Original Text of the Second and the Beginning of the Third Chapter of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*," trans. Yuri Sdobnikov, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 29 (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 431. Yet, money

equating one word with two dollars—I draw instead on Marx's form-analytical account of capitalism.[34]

J.'s commitment to the word count is another way of saying that, for him, only individual words count; and they only count if they can be equated with money. As a journalist, he does not feel obliged to produce articles that are coherently unified by their meaning—for instance, the "real stories" they tell. Instead, his commitment to words as equivalents of money means that the articles he writes rely on an additive logic which explodes the notion of the article as a unified whole. To be sure, J. still needs to string together individual words in sentences and respect the rules of syntax and grammar. More pertinently, by all appearances J. is a proficient writer who possesses a sense for what an article needs to be convincing: "he could always use a quote to round things out" (*JHD* 59). And yet, "round[ing] things out" merely means creating a product that successfully affects readers and entices them to purchase whatever commodity J. has been tasked to write about. After all, when J. thinks about the need to "round things out," it is because of the requirement to write "[n]ine hundred to twelve hundred words," based on "market research" on potential readers' "attention span" (ibid.). He is engaged in what Kant called "*Lohnkunst*"—suggestively rendered by one translator as "mercenary art"[35]—that "is attractive only because of its effect (e.g. the remuneration)."[36] The purpose of the article remains externally imposed by

as a "universal social nexus" that makes capitalist commodity production and exchange possible (ibid.) remains undertheorized in Bourdieu's oeuvre.

34 For critical accounts of Bourdieu from Marxist perspectives, see Mathieu Hikaru Desan, "Bourdieu, Marx, and Capital: A Critique of the Extension Model," *Sociological Theory* 31, no. 4 (2013): 318–42; and Amir Mohseni, "Sozialstruktur vs. Formanalyse: Zum Kapitalbegriff bei Pierre Bourdieu und Karl Marx," in *Methoden der Geisteswissenschaft: Eine Selbstverständigung*, ed. Dirk Hartmann et al. (Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2012).

35 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 171.

36 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 183. This translation renders "*Lohnkunst*" more literally as "remunerative art."

the commissioning party, as does its length and thus everything that determines the shape of the whole. J. is able to produce well-rounded article-commodities, but the primary reality for him remains the individual word, since it is the latter that determines his pay.[37]

In fact, Marx's monetary value theory clearly explains why money has the peculiar power to grant object status to products of labor—including, for my purposes, products as immaterial as words entered into word-processing software.[38] Contrary to the "substantialist" misreading, which attributes the notion that the magnitude of value is determined by the amount of human labor embodied in it,[39] Marx asks why labor must assume the form of value in capitalist society in the first place.[40] In other words, value theory does not supply an answer to the quantitative question of how much a commodity is worth (Marx grants that the classical political economists had already grasped this); instead, it constitutes an attempt to account for the most elemental structures of cap-

37 "The sentiment comes easily at 50 cents per word," quips Waldo Lydecker (played by Clifton Webb) in Otto Preminger's 1944 film noir *Laura*, thus emphasizing that one can convincingly simulate sentiment in order to produce successful article-commodities while still being in it for the money one receives per word. I am grateful to Johannes Völz, who read and commented on an earlier version of this chapter, for compelling me to clarify my argument.

38 On Marxian value theory as a monetary theory of value, see Patrick Murray, "Money as Displaced Social Form: Why Value Cannot be Independent of Price," in *The Mismeasure of Wealth: Essays on Marx and Social Form* (Leiden: Brill, 2016). My understanding of Marxian value theory has been decisively shaped by Michael Heinrich, *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert: Die Marxsche Kritik der politischen Ökonomie zwischen wissenschaftlicher Revolution und klassischer Tradition* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1999).

39 For a good discussion of substantialist readings of Marx, see Frederick Harry Pitts, *Value* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 18–28. The following presentation of Marx's value theory condenses my discussion in Marlon Lieber, "Money Form and Master Painting, or, When Warhol Wanted to Paint the Universal Equivalent Form," in *U.S. American Culture as Popular Culture*, ed. Astrid Böger and Florian Sedlmeier (Heidelberg: Winter, 2022), 485–89.

40 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 174.

italist commodity production and exchange: "the goal is to reconstruct the *specific form of sociality* under capitalism."[41] All societies in which a social division of labor prevails, as Marx notes in a letter to his friend Ludwig Kugelmann, encounter the problem of distributing total social labor "in specific proportions," but the "*specific form*" in which this occurs is historically variable. Under capitalism there is "no conscious social regulation of production,"[42] no plan which coordinates production ex ante, and independent private producers enter into social relations only when they exchange their products on the marketplace. How much privately expended labor is validated as part of the total social labor only becomes apparent retrospectively, that is, when a product is exchanged for money.[43]

This is why money possesses the unique role of being the social form that enables all products of labor to express their value. In addition to having a use-value, each commodity has an exchange-value which is determined by the amount of another product that can be obtained in exchange. More precisely, each commodity has multiple exchange-values because it can be exchanged for many others; thus, the exchange-values must be the "form of appearance" of a "shared content" that makes them exchangeable—and this is what Marx calls value.[44] He goes on to analyze the forms value assumes and—to cut a series of complex deductions short[45]—concludes that one commodity must be excluded for all others to consistently express their value. This is what Marx calls the "universal equivalent," and in practice the universal equivalent form is identi-

41 Christian Lotz, *The Capitalist Schema: Time, Money, and the Culture of Abstraction* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 27, emphasis in original.

42 Karl Marx, "Letter to Ludwig Kugelmann, 11 July 1868," in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 43 (New York: International Publishers, 1988), 68, 69, emphasis in original.

43 See Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*, 80–81.

44 Marx, *Capital*, 127.

45 However, see Michael Heinrich, *How to Read Marx's* Capital: *Commentary and Explanations on the Beginning Chapters*, trans. Alexander Locascio (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2021).

cal with the money form.[46] In short, any commodity can be exchanged for, or purchased with, money. Thus possessing "the form of immediate and universal exchangeability," money is able to retroactively validate privately expended labor as part of the total social labor; it is able to retroactively validate commodities as valuable.

In an innovative reading of Marx's value theory, Christian Lotz has reflected on what could be called the ontological and epistemological ramifications of money's central role in commodity production and exchange. Products of labor, he claims, need a price to count as economic objects. Or, to put it the other way around, a price bestows economic objecthood on things. Expressed from the standpoint of those caught up in capitalist society, then, the "sensuous multiplicity" of things only register as economic objects because of the medium of money. Lotz deliberately draws on Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of the culture industry's "schematism" and argues that the "sameness" the Critical Theorists deplore[47] is "posited in and *as* money." The latter provides the "capitalist schema" which "controls and frames all relationships and object references in a social totality."[48] Lotz's book stresses that the Marxian critique of political economy is not to be understood as a contribution to political economy (or, worse, to economics); instead, it is a critical theory of society which analyzes the way objectivity and subjectivity are mediated.[49] As such, it pursues a method Bourdieu calls "*social praxeology*," which consists of moving beyond common-sense perceptions of the world in order to conceptualize a society's historically

46 Marx, *Capital*, 161, 163.

47 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 106.

48 Lotz, *The Capitalist Schema*, 45, 46, emphasis in original.

49 If it were not for the sometimes inflationary use of the word, one might be tempted to call this relationship dialectical. This way of reading Marx has been substantially influenced by Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*; see also Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. The latter appreciatively invokes Bourdieu's theory of practice and its similarity with Marx's Critical Theory "as a theory of the mutually constituting relationship between social structure and everyday forms of practice and thought" (42; see also 135, n. 51).

specific social structures and to reintroduce "categories of perception" that "structure" practice "from the inside."[50]

On this note, I want to return to J., who thinks of the written word through the medium of money. While he gets paid a lump-sum for the articles he writes, this price is, strictly speaking, not a payment for an article as a whole, but for a concatenation of words at the rate of two dollars. By way of expressing their value in the form of money, the words obtain economic objecthood for J. His work as a freelance journalist thus consists of bringing these objects, the products of his cultural labor, to market. As Marx writes, the market is where commodity owners must mutually recognize each other "as persons whose will resides in [the] objects" they exchange.[51] J.'s "will" is embodied in each and every word-commodity: it must be exchangeable. The same holds true for the entire article-commodity for which J. is ultimately remunerated. But this means that his work does not register as intrinsically meaningful, as the telling of "real stories" would. This is because his word's usefulness is externally determined by the buyers—who either pay J. for the article or send a kill fee (*JHD* 234) if it does not meet their expectations. The use-value of the cultural commodities J. produces is determined by others.

In a defense of the autonomy of works of art in the face of the market's encroachment upon the sphere of cultural production, Nicholas Brown usefully distinguishes between the meaning of a thing produced for one's own use and a thing produced for the market: "If I make a bowl for myself, it is a bowl because I wanted to make a bowl. […]. Intention will be inscribed in the thing itself […]. If I make a bowl for the market, I am primarily concerned with one attribute, its exchangeability." This kind of work becomes about successfully anticipating "other people's

50 Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1992), 11, emphasis in original. Marx's critique of the fetish-like character of the commodity constitutes a break with common-sense perceptions; his value theory, which was (incompletely) unfurled in all three volumes of *Capital*, tries to grasp the core structure of the capitalist mode of production; finally, attempts by Lukács, Postone, Lotz, and others draw on Marx to conceptualize how the structure of capitalism mediates experience.

51 Marx, *Capital*, 178.

desires."[52] The latter precisely describes J.'s work. He can relate to the products of his labor only through the prism of their exchange-value, but their use-value is externally determined. When J. thinks of using quotes "to round things out," his intentions are exclusively directed at the way his pieces are perceived by readers who demand a well-rounded product.[53] Brown writes that "from the standpoint of the commodity owner […] his commodity is qualitatively different from all the others in that his alone has no qualities. To be more precise, his has only one quality that matters, namely its lack of qualities—that is, […] its exchangeability."[54] By writing for the market, J. must undertake a process of abstraction from the meaning his words and stories could have for himself; they are reduced to being commodities whose only meaning is to find a buyer. The representation of freelance journalism in *John Henry Days* insists that, under the spell of the money form, all cultural production tends to become meaningless.

When the act of writing no longer figures as an externalization of meaning in the form of texts that tell "real stories"—which is what *John Henry Days* calls writing that is inherently purposive—, the question remains as to how it is subjectively experienced by writers. The narrator provides insight into J.'s mind: "Twelve hundred words—he can excrete

52 Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism* (Durham/London: Duke UP, 2019), 7.

53 Which is to say, pace Adorno, that cultural creation for the market does not "destroy use value." Theodor W. Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2001), 39. Lacking a use-value, a product of labor would not be a commodity; the point is that the use-value is not determined by the producer but by the marketplace. A good writer, like J., successfully anticipates what customers will find useful. See Marlon Lieber, "Art and Economic Objecthood: Preliminary Remarks on 'Sensuous Supra-Sensuous' Things," *REAL – Yearbook of Research in English and American Studies* 35 (2019): 70–73.

54 Brown, *Autonomy*, 3. J. is not a wage-laborer; he is not employed by someone who subsequently sells his products. As a freelance journalist, he is an independent producer who sells his articles directly to publishers; that is, he enters the market as a commodity owner.

that modest sum in two hours no sweat" (*JHD* 59). Relating to his articles as accumulations of two-dollar words, J. likens them to piles of dung, as his profession no longer consists in creation but in excretion. As Lukács wrote in 1923,

> This phenomenon [the alienation of mental workers from their capacities] can be seen at its most grotesque in journalism. Here it is precisely subjectivity itself, knowledge, temperament and powers of expression that are reduced to an abstract mechanism functioning autonomously and divorced both from the personality of their "owner" and from the material and concrete nature of the subject matter in hand. The journalist's "lack of convictions," the prostitution of his experiences and beliefs is comprehensible only as the apogee of capitalist reification.[55]

Lukács' account captures J.'s reified existence rather well. More than merely diagnosing J.'s jadedness as collateral damage of the world of superficial pop culture, Whitehead's novel, as I have shown, is engaged in a sophisticated investigation of how the most elementary structures of the capitalist mode of production inform—and degrade—human subjectivity. The problem posed by the novel's plot—which I will address in this chapter's final section—is whether J. will be able to rediscover the redemptive power to tell a real story in the end.

Finally, let me note that it is not only the subjectivity of the cultural producer which is degraded to being a producer of filth. *John Henry Days* insinuates that the subject's very existence is endangered when money becomes the nexus that holds society together. For Lotz, objects only exist socially in capitalism by the grace of money. The flipside of his argument is that the same goes for subjects. He claims that "*only because of money* is it that a person exists as a *social* individual," for otherwise their

55 Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 100. Using Georg Simmel's terms, one could also argue that J. evinces the "blasé attitude," which is a consequence of "the reduction of the concrete values of life to the mediating value of money." *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore, David Frisby, and Kaethe Mengelberg (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), 274.

desires cannot become socially valid as they lack the means to satisfy them via commodity exchange.[56] J. reminisces:

> One time he forgot his ATM number and he became less than human, see-through, he waved his hands in the faces of other people but they could not see or hear him. This was how he felt. He wandered the streets for a few hours without currency or an identity until his ATM number returned to his recall as suddenly as it had disappeared. It had been something of an existential dilemma and troubling but it hadn't happened since. (*JHD* 232)

The passage revises the text it so obviously alludes to, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Here invisibility is not caused by racist "people refus[ing] to see" a black man.[57] Instead, the loss of "identity" is a function of no longer being able to obtain "currency."[58] In the world of *John Henry Days*, precarity runs so deep that each individual's existence is perpetually in danger of being negated through exclusion from the realm of the universal equivalent. In *Zone One*, Whitehead will use the zombie trope to imagine a world in which masses have, indeed, become "less than human." In his 2001 novel, the "existential dilemma" of becoming surplus only beckons menacingly in J.'s recollections.

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56 Lotz, *The Capitalist Schema*, 83, emphases in original. See also Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," trans. Martin Milligan and Dirk J. Struik, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 325.

57 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin, 2001), 3.

58 In a review, Jonathan Franzen contends that Whitehead's novel is about a "crisis of manhood." "Freeloading Man," review of *John Henry Days*, by Colson Whitehead, *The New York Times*, May 13, 2001, https://www.nytimes.com/books/01/05/13/reviews/010513.13franzt.html. In his own *The Corrections*, published only months after *John Henry Days*, one of the novel's protagonists lacks the money to buy dinner and steals a salmon filet. The fish which he stuffs down his pants feels "like a wide, warm slug," symbolizing the man's lack of masculinity. Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 98. But what is at stake in Whitehead's novel is personhood, not manhood. Not having money makes you "less than human," not less of a man.

Adam in Commodity Paradise

At one point in *John Henry Days*, Lucien, the master of the List, expresses his ambition to find names that express the "truth" of objects destined to be sold (*JHD* 195). In *Apex Hides the Hurt*, Whitehead's next novel, naming becomes the chief occupation of the nameless protagonist. In chapter two, I discussed the constellation of characters involved in renaming the town of Winthrop. While the search for an appropriate name constitutes the issue around which the novel's plot revolves, *Apex* repeatedly presents events in the protagonist's career as a "nomenclature consultant" (*AHH* 27),[59] who also expresses a deep commitment to finding the true names of things:

> Isn't it great when you're a kid and the whole world is full of anonymous things? […]. Everything is bright and mysterious until you know what it is called and then all the light goes out of it. All those flying gliding things are just *birds*. And etc. […]. What he had given to all those things had been the right name, but never the true name. For things had true natures, and they hid behind false names, beneath the skin we gave them. (*AHH* 182; emphasis in original)

Language, he believes, abstracts from the particular qualities of things, hiding the truth beneath the artificial shell of the signifier. What the protagonist bemoans, in other words, is the irreducible gap between concept and reality. And yet, a man can dream: "A name that got to the heart of the thing—that would be miraculous. But he never got the heart of the thing, he just slapped a bandage on it to keep the pus in. […]. What is the name for that which is always beyond our grasp? What do you call *that which escapes*?" (*AHH* 183; emphasis in original) But then, his job consists in thinking up names for commodities—be they material or immaterial, animal, vegetable, or mineral. And has not the preceding analysis shown that this class of objects has no inner truth, no hidden essence, except for the qualityless quality of their exchangeability?

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59 All references to Colson Whitehead, *Apex Hides the Hurt* (New York: Doubleday, 2006) will hereafter be cited parenthetically in the text as *AHH*.

The desire to provide objects with names which express an inner truth reveals the novel's nameless protagonist to be a revenant of the biblical Adam, according to Walter Benjamin's theory of language. But while it was the Fall that resulted in the loss of the "paradisical language" in Benjamin's account,[60] *Apex* offers an entirely secular explanation. "God's creation is completed," when Adam gives names to the creatures, claims Benjamin.[61] To do so, however, the divinely-inspired nomenclature consultant must be "attentive to nature's inner tendency."[62] *Apex*'s protagonist, an unnamed Adam roaming a paradise which appears as an immense collection of commodities shares a secularized version of this desire as evinced by his desire to find the "true names" that do justice to the "heart of the thing." Alas, both the protagonist and Benjamin believe that there are merely words—"false names," even the "right names," but never the "true name"—which do not capture an object's essence in all its true particularity but merely serve as a means to the end of communication. As such, it amounts to a "bourgeois conception of language" in which the relationship between word and things is "accidental."[63] Now, after the Fall, words are unable to "recapture the concrete knowledge of the particular provided by the name."[64] The world of *Apex* is fallen, too,

60 Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1996), 71.

61 Ibid., 65.

62 Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2012), 15.

63 Benjamin, "On Language," 65, 69. What Benjamin calls a "bourgeois conception" comes close to Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of the sign. The latter's *Cours de linguistique générale* was published in 1916, the same year that Benjamin penned his essay. According to Anson Rabinbach, Benjamin discovered the Swiss linguist's work only later in his life. See "Between Apocalypse and Enlightenment: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism," in *Walter Benjamin: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, vol. 3, ed. Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 2005), 157, n. 126.

64 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 88.

if for other reasons. Hence, the novel need not imagine a prelapsarian state of linguistic fullness, but can focus its attention on the profane causes of language's flaws. Again, as in *John Henry Days*, it will be the use of words in the service of the commodity that provides the key.

Whatever the protagonist's self-representation, in other words, whether he thinks that he is involved in the search for true names or not, what he actually does is name objects to be sold. As demonstrated in the previous section, he must thus ignore all the objects' qualities except for their exchangeability. The nomenclature consultants have only given various names to products; the point is to sell them. Thus, the protagonist wonders "what was a name […] if it didn't move the product" (*AHH* 109). Moving the product—like rounding things out—is another way of saying that his creations must appeal to an audience of potential customers. The protagonist cannot actually care about getting to the heart of the products; he can only care about the effect his names might have on others. Or, in his words, rendered in free indirect discourse, the names must "set up a vibration in the bones of potential customers" (*AHH* 177). Once more, Whitehead's novel emphasizes that the question of a commodity's use-value is settled in the marketplace.

Far from getting to the "heart of the thing," the protagonist employs language to abstract from the object's particularity. His task, he reasons, is to "make things more compact," to "[s]queeze down the salient qualities into a convenient package" (*AHH* 6–7). His anxiety over the inadequacy of his names, then, reacts not to the Fall; neither, however, is Whitehead's novel motivated by highlighting language's inevitable shortcomings à la poststructuralism. Instead, when he turns products into "convenient packages" through a name that triggers resonance in customer's bodies, he merely linguistically enacts the abstraction that turns a commodity into a commensurable object (qua value) that elicits the customers' desire to buy it (qua use-value). The protagonist's namelessness, then, is appropriate not because of his weak ties to "family and [racial] community,"[65] but because he is nothing but a "personifica-

65 Stephanie Li, *Signifying Without Specifying: Racial Discourse in the Age of Obama* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2012), 74.

tion[]" of an "economic categor[y]"[66]: his names merely mediate between production and consumption by facilitating acts of exchange.

This he does extraordinarily well; that is, he proves to be fluent in the language of commodity exchange.[67] His major success is Apex, the multicolored adhesive bandage. Not only is Apex a merely superficial solution to the problem of racialized domination that, moreover, cannot address social ills that are not reducible to skin color, as discussed in chapter two. It is also possible to see that it uses the power of abstraction as a means of producing the very differences it promises to recognize in the service of profit. The bandages also transmute the "salient qualities" of human bodies into a "convenient package"—literally a package of "multicultural adhesive bandages" that come in twenty colors (*AHH* 87). The sensuous multiplicity of bodies is subsumed under a preconceived schema—not quite Lotz's "capitalist schema," but something closer to Fanon's "epidermal racial schema"[68] but imposed through the multicolored patch rather than the white gaze. The manufacturer, readers learn, "devised thirty hues originally, later knocked them down to twenty after research determined a zone of comfort. It didn't have to be perfect, just not too insulting" (*AHH* 89). Racial difference is reified in and through an arbitrary classification system distinguishing between shades such as "# A12" or "# A25," which stand for "white" and "black," respectively (*AHH* 108). Rather than doing justice to actually existing bodies, humans are assigned to a circumscribed set of possible subject positions based on Apex's product offerings. In other words, by purchasing and using an Apex bandage, customers abstract from the particularity of their bodies and assign themselves to one of twenty racial (sub)groups. But this classification scheme does not get to the heart of things, either; it has been

66 Marx, *Capital*, 92.

67 For an intriguing account of all languages as "dialects of the universal commodity-language," see Werner Hamacher, "Lingua Amissa: The Messianism of Commodity-Language and Derrida's *Specters of Marx*," trans. Kelly Barry, in Jacques Derrida et al., *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's* Specters of Marx, ed. Michael Sprinker (London/New York: Verso, 2008), 174 et passim..

68 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 92.

created with the intent of selling "colors" to a "clientele" (*AHH* 89) which is itself a product of the logic of commodity exchange.[69]

In the world of *Apex*, then, bodies are subsumed by the commodity form and pressed into a profit-driven classification scheme. But the body persists. Whitehead's novel interweaves two narratives starring the same protagonist. One of them, set in the novel's present, is about his task of renaming the town of Winthrop. The other is about his previous career as a successful nomenclature consultant. The latter ends with a "misfortune" that sends the protagonist into hiding at home for months; his exit from self-imposed hibernation to travel to Winthrop is what sets off the former narrative (*AHH* 6). Later, readers find out that he also repeatedly stubs his toe, resulting in a wound which, covered with an Apex bandage, begins to fester.

At the "Identity Awards," a ceremony celebrating the most creative name-givers, his inflamed toe causes him to lose sense of reality. The narrator reproduces the protagonist's feverish perceptions: "bodies disappeared and people were reduced to white name tags levitating in the air" (*AHH* 168). In this hallucinatory state, a "physical manifestation of his conscience,"[70] he sees the power of abstraction exerted on individuals who become mere name tags; tags which reduce their wearers to being a "LIAR" or a "BED WETTER" (*AHH* 170). The scene comes to a climax when the protagonist wanders toward Times Square, where he sees "all the logos and names" as if they were floating around him (*AHH* 181) and

69 Because Apex abstracts from the sensuous multiplicity of human bodies in practice and not just in thought, it is tempting to call its operation a "real abstraction." For the distinction between real and thought abstractions, see Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel (Leiden: Brill, 2021). For an account of race as a real abstraction, see Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano, "Race, Real Estate and Real Abstraction," *Radical Philosophy* 194 (2015): 8–17. For a useful discussion of the concept's history, see Chris O'Kane, "The Critique of Real Abstraction: From the Critical Theory of Society to the Critique of Political Economy and Back Again," in *Marx and Contemporary Philosophy: The Philosophy of Real Abstraction*, ed. Antonio Oliva, Ángel Oliva, and Iván Novara (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

70 Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 86.

realizes that their referents are "imprisoned as *products* […] on the shelves of supermarkets" (*AHH* 182; emphasis in original). In this "epiphan[y]" (*AHH* 198) the protagonist comes to realize that the names are nothing but commodity names. It is the insistence of his body—a "gnawing and poisonous tooth of bodily pain" in "that spot," his toe[71]—that the material world cannot be spirited away entirely by way of abstraction that allows him to reflect on his own role.

Out of This World

Both novels present a world under the spell of the commodity. But also is either one able to envision an escape route? At the beginning *John Henry Days*, J. Sutter is three months into his attempt at "going for the record." That is, his bodily needs—the need for food and drink—have been subordinated to the requirements of his work, that is, to the List's whimsies. In other words, he has been dispossessed of control over his life's elementary functions—or, more to the point, has willingly transferred control of them to the market. His existence is governed by a heteronomous force, and this makes it extremely precarious. In this regard, it makes sense to compare J., as one critic does, to another literary character who is known by only a single letter: Kafka's K.[72] In fact, Bourdieu devotes a section of his *Pascalian Meditations* to a reading of *The Trial* and contends that the latter presents "the model of a social universe dominated by such an absolute and unpredictable power, capable of inducing extreme anxiety by

71 The line appears in *The Scarlet Letter* in reference to the constant pain that ultimately causes Dimmesdale to confess his complicity in Hester Prynne's transgression of Puritan social codes. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (London: Penguin, 2003), 130. The protagonist's vision of name tags announcing people's flaws recalls Hester's "new sense" which allows her to believe that "if truth were everywhere to be shown, a scarlet letter would blaze forth upon many a bosom" (79). For a discussion of Puritan motives in *Apex*, see Christopher Leise, "With Names, No Coincidence: Colson Whitehead's Postracial Puritan Allegory," *African American Review* 47, no. 2–3 (2014).

72 Cooper, *Playing With Expectations*, 143.

condemning its victims to very strong investment combined with very great insecurity."[73] For K. to experience the latter due to being entirely at the court's mercy, he must come to believe in its significance. Over the course of *The Trial*, he develops an interest in the game and desires to beat the court on its own terrain; only thus can the institution wield its symbolic power over K. In other words, Kafka's novel does not just represent the court as an alien social force that crushes the individual; it also reveals the tacit complicity that is necessary for the relationship of domination to be continually reproduced. *John Henry Days* does something very similar by narrating J.'s trajectory from his youthful commitment to "real stories" to his cynical investment in the world of puff. One of his colleagues at one point tells him "[t]he days will come when you don't care that you don't care" (*JHD* 336). But not caring, paradoxically, amounts to caring a lot. Not caring about anything other than "two dollars a word" amounts to precisely that "fundamental belief in the interests of the game"[74] that is required from a mercenary journalist.

Thus, the question arises: what does it take to stop caring about this game and start caring about something else? J., as I have argued in a previous section, has internalized the temporal discipline required by his line of work. He lives not according to his own schedule, but is, as Kafka's protagonist (according to Bourdieu), "condemned to live in a time oriented by others, an alienated time."[75] In response, a "self-appropriation of time" is necessary to combat the experience of alienation.[76] Whitehead's novel employs a well-tested textual strategy to narrativize an alternative experience of time that affords J. the ability to consider retaking control of his life by using the tropes of pastoralism. Upon waking a day after his almost fatal choking incident, J. decides to take a walk to get breakfast. Enjoying the scenery, "[h]e feels good." The experience of serene nonhuman nature, reinforced by the novel's attention to the sounds J. hears, corresponds to a feeling of repose: "This is the country,

73 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 229.

74 Ibid., 11.

75 Ibid., 237.

76 Pieper, "Prekarisierung," 228, my translation.

it is safe" (ibid.). The West Virginia landscape that J. crosses on his walk does not trigger the paranoia discussed in chapter two[77]; instead, it is the occasion for pastoral motifs to structure J.'s experience. On the one hand, it is not an encounter with wilderness, since there remain reassuring "sign[s] of civilization" such as railroad tracks (*JHD* 151). On the other, J. can forget the social forces that normally control his life; he has entered the "middle landscape" of the pastoral imagination which, according to Leo Marx's classic study, is located "somewhere 'between,' yet in a transcendent relation to the opposing forces of civilization and nature."[78] Here J. relaxes, since he experiences "[t]ime out of the world" (ibid.).[79]

It is precisely the experience of time not being governed by the logic of exchange that makes it so redemptive. Another term the narrator, who reproduces J.'s perceptions and thoughts in free indirect discourse, uses to characterize the temporality that prevails in the West Virginia countryside is "receiptless span of time" (ibid.). In J.'s everyday life, receipts are prized possessions because they promise reimbursement. When the reader first encounters J. waiting to board the plane to Charleston, he spots a stray receipt on the floor and anthropomorphizes it: "It taunts him, vibrates flirtatiously." It thus tempts him because J. "is hungry and the next best thing to an actual sandwich is the paper trail of a sandwich" for which he can submit for reimbursement (*JHD* 9). In other words, J.

77 More precisely, J. is able to keep it in check. When a car approaches on a road, he "fights the vision his paranoia prepares for him" (*JHD* 150).

78 Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1964), 23. It is ironic that J. considers the visible presence of the railroad as a benign symbol of civilization's advantages, as it has traditionally played the role of a "counterforce" (25) violently encroaching upon the pastoral idyll. However, now that the railroad has been "made inefficient by technical advances" (*JHD* 285–86) it appears as a nostalgic reminder of simpler times.

79 At this point I am not interested in discussing the question of whether or not the West Virginian countryside is best grasped under the rubric of nature in the first place. It certainly is not a pristine landscape that could figure as society or culture's Other; but it fulfills the function of nature qua "middle landscape." For a brief discussion of the concept of nature, see re:articulate, ""Nature/Culture," *Cultural Studies*, n.d. [May 2022], https://www.cultural-studies.org/current-issues-in-cultural-studies/nature-culture. See also Malm, *The Progress of This Storm*.

plans to pretend to have engaged in an act of reproductive consumption in order to—potentially—receive a sum of money that would allow him to consume actual food. His present need for nourishment goes unsatisfied, however. This is to say that the time of receipts is a time of radical existential uncertainty, of precarity with a vengeance, because whether or not J. will be reimbursed at some point will be decided by an unknown person. Receiptless time, then, allows for the self-appropriation of time.

Consequently, J. feels that he is "[o]n his own itinerary" during his walk and momentously "decides he will pay for his own breakfast when he gets into town" (*JHD* 149). This would constitute an interruption of "the unbroken line of events" (*JHD* 388) that J. has been attending on his streak and, as such, a matter of beginning to wrest control over his life and away from the alien social force he has submitted to before. Yet, *John Henry Days* does not reveal whether or not J. pays for his food. After he has finished his breakfast he thinks, "I'm going for the record" (*JHD* 189). In the end the reader does not find out whether J. has paid, but the apparently character-transforming power of the pastoral interlude is relativized nonetheless.

During breakfast, J. first has a conversation with Pamela Street, and it is her family story that eventually awakens his desire to tell a real story. She is New Yorker whose late father ran a museum commemorating John Henry from his apartment, a museum that never had a single visitor. Pamela later asks J. to help her find the steel driver's burial site, where she wants to bury her father's remains. Afterwards, the following passage describes how this experience presents "new possibilities" and a "new inscriptive practice" to J.[80]

> She asked him on the way down if he got his story. J. Sutter said yes. He has a story but it is not the one he planned. Before he had been kidding about the story in order to get close to the woman. He had put on paper some of the things she had said the day before bur now he thought what happened today was the real story. It is not the kind of

80 Ezra Dan Feldman, "The Describer's Nightmare: Touching Form in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 52, no. 3 (2019): 458.

> thing he usually writes. It is not puff. It is not for the website. He does not know who would take it. The dirt had not given him any receipts to be reimbursed. He does not even know if it is a story. He only knows it is worth telling. (*JHD* 387)

A story "worth telling" is precisely what J. could not conceive of as long as he was thinking only of "two dollars a word" (*JHD* 47). It is J. himself who judged Mr. Street's story valuable, which makes it radically different from the articles he normally writes, as they are commissioned by others. In fact, J. explicitly rejects the idea that he would write this story for anyone else to "take it." Previously, his writerly practice consisted of anticipating his customer's preferences: he was "round[ing] things out" so that someone would "take," that is, pay for, his pieces. Now he has found a story that is inherently meaningful and deserves to be told as an end in itself. This is because it is the story of a man who devoted his life to an idea that he found significant enough to drive both his marriage and his store into ruin.[81] The example of a commitment that defies the demands of the market inspires J. to rediscover his belief that "real stories" are the ones that are "worth telling," not worth selling.

But then, the reader never gets to find out whether J. lives to tell the tale. Various intercalary chapters include references to a deadly shooting that takes place on the final day of the festival, and J. might be among its victims. *John Henry Days* provides no closure, however, and refuses to tell its readers whether J. decides to return to New York City with Pamela before the shooting takes place or whether he stays But maybe it is not all that important. What matters is, as Derek Maus puts it, J.'s "story *has*

81 Thus, in contrast to Evá Tettenborn, I do not believe that J. is inspired by Mr. Street's interest in celebrating John Henry as a symbol of African American masculinity which has been erased from history. See "'A Mountain Full of Ghosts': Mourning African American Masculinity in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*," *African American Review* 46, no. 2–3 (2013), 273. In fact, J. derides what he believes to have been Mr. Street's "nationalist fever" and the idea that one should remember "the steeldriver as an ideal of black masculinity in a castrating county" (*JHD* 189). There is no reason to believe that J. suddenly starts seeking ancestor figures.

been worth telling."[82] The story told by Whitehead is that of how capitalism turns cultural production into excrement and renders human existence precarious, but it also insists that there is an alternative.

Five years later, in *Apex Hides the Hurt*, this is no longer as apparent. Its protagonist also spends some time in nonhuman nature while on a team-building exercise. Unlike J., however, it reminds him of an alternative to the world of naming commodities; quite the opposite, it merely reinforces the principles of this world. When the nameless protagonist goes for a walk to escape his colleagues, the novel almost lures the reader into believing that it also relies on the tropes of pastoralism:

> At first it was quiet. Such was his frame of reference that he likened it to the deep silence that follows when a refrigerator stops humming. […]. He continued down the path, which terminated at the lip of a gloomy, mottled marsh. He heard the words of the woods. Animals, insects, small branches disturbed by unseen creatures. (*AHH* 152)

At first, he can merely make sense of nature's silence through the lens of a modern technology. But the registering of the woods' sounds suggests that he might be in for a transformative experience. Not so, however. He thinks of the sounds as the "sales pitch of nature" (*AHH* 152) and continues:

> *Nature* is a strong brand name. Everybody knew that. First thing. Nomenclature 101. Slap *Nature* on the package, you were golden. Those words on the package promise ease from metropolitan care, modern worries. […]. That fruit has splendid packaging, it has solid consumer awareness and is an animal favorite. Its seeds will be deposited in spoor miles away and its market dominance will increase. […]. Natural selection was market forces. In business, in the woods: what is necessary to the world will last. (*AHH* 153, emphases in original)

Nature is thus also subsumed by the "capitalist schema" and reduced to little more than a slogan that can vibrate the bones of potential

82 Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 62, emphasis in original.

customers. Even more, the protagonist's thoughts naturalize market practices by attributing competitive agency to nonhuman animals and plants. In *John Henry Days* nonhuman nature at least promised a glimpse of a life lived "out of the world" of capital. However, in *Apex* there is no longer an outside. J. Sutter experiences the subordination of writing to the market's demands as a transformation of his activity into excretion. In *Apex*, the protagonist's nature walk ends when he stumbles and finds himself standing "up to his ankles in pig shit" (*AHH* 154). In the final instance, Whitehead's novel suggests, nature subsumed by the commodity form is reduced to filth.

It is this incident that causes the protagonist's toe to go from bad to worse. When he eventually removes the adhesive bandage, his "toe had turned a strange, rotten-apple pulp of red and gray, and there was no community on Earth that might be served by the Apex that corresponded to that color" (*AHH* 162). Indeed, in the world of *Apex*, with its recognition of exactly twenty reified communities, none would fit. The color of the protagonist's putrefied toe anticipates a position constitutively excluded from all the communities which mingle in civil society—the part of no part, as Jacques Rancière might put it.[83] Whitehead's fifth novel will revolve around precisely the community he might join, after all. His toe has turned "putrid" (*AHH* 161), and he walks with a limp; in short, he is slowly becoming a zombie.

83 See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis/London: U of Minnesota P, 1999), 11.