

**CYNTHIA
CRUZ**



THE MELANCHOLIA OF CLASS

A Manifesto for
the Working Class

Repeater

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A Manifesto for
the Working Class



“Cynthia Cruz knows all the traps, dead ends, and false victories waiting for working-class kids trying to become ‘someone’ in the eyes of the monied world. In her deft portraits of artists like Paul Weller and Barbara Loden, she not only defines invisible barriers and gives voice to unspoken forms of despair, but also offers avenues of escape. This is a vital book, deeply personal and charged with the kind of wisdom and solidarity that only belongs to those who understand what it feels like to be overlooked and left behind.”

— **JIM GAVIN**, CREATOR OF *LODGE 49*

“An unprecedented reckoning with class and poverty as it relates to creative life in the modern age. Cruz shines a clear-eyed and evincing light on what often elides description in literary arts: the economic and social cost of life under and through the written word. Through capacious, erudite, and ultimately compassionate interrogation of capitalism’s steady and pervasive chiasma on literary culture and beyond, Cruz forges a merciful new footing to state what’s long overdue: that many of us have been dying while we write, and that the sorrow of surviving poverty, if at all, is a grief finally named in this courageous and deeply true work.”

— **OCEAN VUONG**, AUTHOR OF *ON EARTH WE’RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS*

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*A MANIFESTO
FOR THE
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The logo for Repeater, featuring the word "Repeater" in a white sans-serif font inside a black rectangular box. Below the box is a black, stylized shape that resembles a speech bubble tail or a drop.

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1

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I want to rehabilitate this period by writing of it with the name of things most noble. My victory is verbal and I owe it to the richness of the terms, but may the poverty that counsels such choices be blessed.

— Jean Genet

CONTENTS

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[The Gap Between Worlds](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Death Shuttle into the World](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[The Melancholia of Class](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Between Two Deaths](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Between Two Deaths II: The Libidinal Working-Class Body](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[The Undead](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[The Haunting](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[The Death Drive](#)

[Conclusion](#)

Notes

Acknowledgments

INTRODUCTION

The first tremors of awakening serve to deepen sleep.

— Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

I recently met with a former mentor and professor of mine. I explained this book and its concept to her: the melancholia that ensues when one abandons one's working-class background. After I had explained it and how it came about, she told me, reassuringly, that I don't dress or talk like someone from the working class. I was stunned by her comment. What, I wondered, did she imagine someone from the working class might look or talk like? I was shocked, and yet friends and colleagues say things like this to me often.

I didn't ask my mentor what she imagined the working class look or talk like. I was too shocked to react in any coherent way. But also, I already had a pretty good idea. The images my mentor was calling to mind when she imagined me as not looking or talking like someone from the working class are the same ones friends and colleagues call to mind when they too imagine the working class.

When, for instance, I was on food stamps, when for much of my adult life my earnings have situated me comfortably within the US parameters for poverty, what did I look like? I was teaching undergraduate and graduate students; I was writing books. In other words, I appeared the way I always appear.

Being poor or working-class¹ is not a "look." The specter of what the middle class imagine as "working class" is always with me. In a sense, this specter is my double, my working-class self, the ghost of who I left behind when I left my home town, now hidden behind a palimpsest of tropes the middle class invented (throughout this book I use the terms middle class,

bourgeoisie and ruling class interchangeably). It is where I come from, who I am and who I will always be.

Of course, even when I've lived in poverty, I've been able to present myself: comb my hair, wear clean, contemporary clothing. And is this not the case for all working-class people? When the middle class say I don't look or sound working-class, what is really being alluded to is the unsayable — how the working-class subject appears in the dreams of the middle class: a monstrosity, unclean, disheveled, haunting. Such tropes are consistent — they've been around for decades — and are culturally constructed and reinforced by the media. And yet, of course, such tropes contradict reality.

The growing majority of working-class people in the United States are women and non-white. Here in New York City, for example, where I live, the majority of construction workers, nannies, taxi drivers, shop clerks, bus drivers, transit workers, and food deliverers are not white. At the public university where I teach, my students are working-class and almost entirely non-white. The liberal middle class's continued adherence to this set of old stereotypes serves to erase the working class in two ways. First, by insisting that there is no working class because there are seemingly no white, male factory workers anymore, whilst, at the same time, removing social class from the experience of the non-white working class. Furthermore, these stereotypes set up a false binary between white and non-white workers when, in fact, all members of the working class share in the same struggle against oppression by the ruling class. With the removal of the term "social class" from discourse, this elementary fact is erased.

And yet it wasn't always this way. As Boris Groys points out, before the 1980s there was a shift from what he calls "horizontal solidarity" to "vertical solidarity." As he writes:

The notion of solidarity is historically connected to the struggle of the exploited classes against the exploiting classes. Thus, in the context of the

class struggle solidarity was always “horizontal solidarity.” This was a solidarity among the oppressed, directed against the oppressors.²

In the 1980s, parallel with the emergence of neoliberalism (throughout this book I use neoliberalism and capitalism interchangeably), this new vertical solidarity began to emerge. As Groys writes, ‘Thus it is that we will often read that all American women should manifest their solidarity with Hillary Clinton because she’s a woman.’ All women, regardless of social class, were expected to take on the same desire to “move up the ladder.” These ideologies are never spoken, they don’t have to be — all true ideologies are normalized, permeating through all aspects of culture.

This slow erasure of social class and class difference and insistence on meritocracy has changed our society. At the same time, although social class has been removed from discourse, old, culturally-constructed stereotypes of the working class continue, keeping the working class in our place. When my mentor told me that I didn’t look working-class, I was rendered speechless. One moment I was having a conversation with an activist about the state of the world. The next moment I was shocked back into reality. “Amnesia is a constant sea. We swim in it all the time. We need the ballast of memory,” as the filmmaker John Akomfrah says.³ I was asleep in the belief that I was just like my mentor, that my mentor imagined me as equal. I fall asleep, I wake up, I play the charade, I fall asleep again. Then I am awakened once again when I am forced to encounter what Lacan calls the Real, that which is in excess of what my psyche can handle. Amnesia, forgetfulness, and dissociation are ways the psyche protects itself from the Real, from the original trauma. When, for example, the reality of who I am and where I come from is projected back onto me and I am removed from the role I am in that moment inhabiting (college professor, writer, academic, etc.). These occurrences happen all the time, and yet each time they occur, I am shocked again.

When my mentor said I didn't look or sound working-class, she was saying two things. First, she was congratulating me for passing as middle-class. Second, she was telling me that, as a result of my passing as middle-class, I was not like other working-class people. "You don't look or sound working-class," is a way of attempting to cleave me away from the rest of the working class. I am the exception. This cleaving-away allows the person I am speaking to a sense of relief: if I am not really working-class, then they are not really talking to someone who is working-class.

Being working-class in the United States is like living in a separate, parallel world. I am sitting in a window-less room of the NYC Department of Social Services among other families, workers, and the poor, who, like me, have been asked to arrive by a specific hour and, like me, have been waiting an entire day to be seen. Not because there has been an emergency or a misunderstanding, but because this is how the working class experiences time in America.

We wait, some of us asleep in the stiff, plastic chairs. No one appears visibly upset. We are accustomed to this. We know this is the unspoken rule we have to abide by: we trade in our time for services. Though I am here to apply for Food Stamps, this holds true for trying to receive disability coverage or other social services. We wait for days in waiting rooms and then, once we are summoned to speak with someone, we are told we need to fill out an additional form, go to another office, go home to retrieve another document. The unspoken assumption is that we have no work, that we have nothing better to do. It feels like a form of punishment — for being unfit or lazy. For being unable to compete in neoliberal society.

How do I write about something so omnipresent, something that informs every aspect of my life and yet, for many, does not exist?

In Jane Jin Kaisen's film *The Woman, The Orphan, and The Tiger*, one of several voices says: "Trying to figure out how I can talk about something

that is unseen, that most people don't believe. Something... the *[silence/pause]* ... secret itself or the gap in one's speech gives rise to a ghost." In the film, Kaisen, in collaboration with Guston Soudin-Kung, investigates how trauma is passed down through generations through haunting. Specifically, the film follows former "comfort women" — girls and women who were forced into sex slavery for the Imperial Japanese Army — and female adoptees sent as children mostly to the West. Many of the women in the film find themselves displaced, without a home, their histories made mute.

The film is constructed of a montage of voices and stories, and addresses the return of the repressed through a series of gaps and ruptures. Kaisen makes no attempt to speak on behalf of any of the women, and she avoids providing a fixed narrative. Instead, through the fissures and ruptures in the film, the spaces of silence and static, there arises the possibility for a dialectic, places where the viewer might work toward meaning.

Kaisen's question of how to address something that is "unseen," something that "most people don't believe in," is relevant here in relation to our discussion of social class. Because working-class people have experienced a symbolic death, to attempt to speak about social class is to motion to a ghost. Ghost-like figures appear throughout this book. Neither dead nor alive, the working class exists between worlds.

During the past year, as I wrote and revised this book, I have also been teaching as an adjunct. Last term I taught six courses, this term I am teaching three and next term I am teaching one. What this means is that I work from term to term with no job security. It also means that most of my time and energy (mental and physical) is spent preparing for classes, teaching, and reading students' work. I am grateful for this work, which is incredibly fulfilling and hard to come by. My discussions with students buoy me, make it all seem worth it. But at the same time, I live semester to

semester, never knowing if I'll have work next term. Until this semester I did not have health insurance and I haven't had dental insurance for over twenty years. This is the way I live; it is the way I have always lived.

And yet I feel guilty, because I realize how fortunate I am: to have work at all, to be able to teach. I think of other working-class writers I have met who, under the constant duress of economic instability and illness, overburdened with work, quit writing, and are submerged beneath the system.

In this collection of essays, I explore the lives of working-class artists, musicians, writers, and filmmakers. All left their working-class origins in order to "become someone." Some returned, some did not; some attempted to assimilate into middle-class culture, some resisted, refusing this form of annihilation. Contradictions abound throughout. This is in part because the working-class subject living in neoliberal society is inundated with the values and aesthetics of the ruling class. We cannot help but be informed by it: it is everywhere. When the working-class subject looks out into the world, she does not see herself reflected back, she sees only the middle class mirrored back to her. Indeed, this effect is so overpowering, I was not aware I was not middle-class until my being working-class was interpolated onto me as a child. Furthermore, because neoliberalism insists there are no social classes, there is, according to its ideology, no working class. By default, the working-class subject miraculously does not exist. This being the case, the working-class subject is a ghost, which is to say alive but not living, a double; a contradiction.

In Joanna Hogg's film *The Souvenir*, the male protagonist, a working-class contemporary dandy called Anthony who is or is not a diplomat and does or does not travel for business to far-away cities, leads Julie, his lover, his double and class enemy, up a set of stairs in her posh townhouse, to a top window where, at the very moment she reaches it, a nearby bomb is

detonated. Anthony is not in the apartment. Rather, he has set up a series of paper notes with arrows, enigmatically, upon the steps leading up to the top floor. How did Anthony know that the bomb would be detonated at that precise moment? What is he trying to tell or show her? Is this a threat? Or is it a sign of loyalty, that he will protect her from such encroaching danger? Or is it perhaps meant to convey both?

It is true that he speaks up for the IRA when he meets Julie's parents in their country mansion, but it is equally true that he is a diplomat, according, of course, to his own telling. He may well be one; he has a photograph of himself in Afghanistan. Or, a photograph of himself in a place he says is Afghanistan.

Freud can help here. He reminds us that what the psyche cannot handle, the mind represses. In a world where one does not exist, being ignored and, at the same time, being the subject of daily acts of violence, is difficult if not impossible. The mind, or rather the psyche, represses the reality of what is happening in order to survive. Furthermore, one's psyche may also repress the truth that one is working-class in order to survive. The working-class artist who trades in her past, her history, family, community, and self for a sleeker, more palatable version of herself, who tries to pass as middle-class (or upper middle-class in Anthony's case), is only doing what culture and society tells her to do. Neoliberalism assures us that we are all born equal, each of us with the same access to material, cultural, and social capital — and that there are no social classes. To insist otherwise is to appear ungrateful, negative, depressing, and often mentally ill. Indeed, to blame one's inability to "succeed" in neoliberal society (to blame systemic forces rather than one's own personal failure) is to set one's self outside the all-pervasive neoliberal system. Pointing out the unfairness of the system, is, in a sense, a form of giving up and dropping out of the game. The "bootstraps" trope is just that — a trope, a lie. And yet it's what most people still

believe. This splitting of the self speaks to the contradictory nature of this book and its subject.

Anthony attempts to pass as another social class because not to do so is to live a life on the margins, to be left outside the walls of what we are told, implicitly at least, is the world. Everywhere we look — magazines, television, movies, fashion, clothing, music, politicians — everything — all of it — originates, is made from, and thus reflects the lifestyles and the values of the middle class. Though it's true that there were writers and musicians, TV shows and characters from the working class, this is largely no longer the case.

To resist assimilation is to insist on our working-class origins, on carrying with us the lives and histories of our families, communities, histories, and culture. To give up pretending that one is not who one is, is to render one's self marginalized. It is to refuse neoliberalism — which insists on homogeneity — with all of its ideologies of aspiration, optimism, progress, and the idea that power and money ought to reside in the hands of the ruling class. I don't personally care if the middle class has money or material things or power. What I care about is that the working class and the poor lack material goods, jobs that could provide such goods, agency, and mastery over our lives and the lives of those in our communities.

These and other contradictions inform the inner worlds of the working class. We end up split, doubled: caught between the world of our origins and the middle-class world we now live in. Existing in neither, the working-class subject belongs nowhere. Having abandoned her working-class origins, coming up against the threshold of the middle-class world (which will not allow her access), she is neither working-class nor is she middle-class. She is a ghost, existing between worlds, a haunting. And yet these contradictions and others that occur and multiply throughout this book, in their dialectics, form a truth. As Hegel writes: "Contradiction is the rule of truth, non-contradiction of the false."⁴ To write about the working class is to

enter into contradiction. It is also to enter into a void. The gap between worlds; the void between deaths.

And death haunts this text. The majority of artists I write about suffer from melancholia and/or produce work infused with it. Most are dead. Faced with no other possible option, the majority use drugs or alcohol to create an alternative exit, a phenomenological space in which to exist. Death and illness haunt these pages as death and illness haunt the lives of the working class.

I can't write about what I have lost, the loss that results in the melancholia of class, without locating the object that has been lost. And yet I can't locate it, because it is symbolically dead, killed off by neoliberalism. But by writing about this loss, through the examples of artists and writers who experience the melancholia of class, I can begin to locate this lost loved object, this phantom limb, and by doing so, articulate the working class back into being. As Barbara Loden said of the act of making her film *Wanda*: "I made *Wanda* as a way of confirming my own existence."⁵

This work will not diminish the melancholia. Rather, by naming it, I hope to perform an act of communal rite, a calling-into-being, and through this, begin to awaken from the death-sleep of amnesia.

CHAPTER ONE

THE GAP BETWEEN WORLDS

And the public gets what the public wants

But I want nothing this society's got

— The Jam, “Going Underground”

During high school I spent my days watching the clock, counting the hours until the final bell when I could return home, go back into my bedroom, shut the door, and listen to music until bedtime. I felt alienated but I didn't know why. I was bullied and I was teased but never for any specific reason. This, of course, I took as evidence that there was something inherently wrong with me. I was always angry or depressed. Over the years I had taught myself to be invisible. I kept to myself, rarely spoke, and spent all my time listening to music. During breaks between class I hid in the corridors or smoked alone in the bathroom. Though my body was there — in the corridors, in the classroom, in the bathroom — I was never really there. I wasn't anywhere.

As far back as I can remember I have been aware of a distinct delineation between myself and my family and the world around us. This space between, this gap or delay, I experienced in my interactions with others and, at the same time, it was interpolated onto me. For example, when those from the middle class pointed out characteristics, mannerisms, values or ideas of mine that were deemed to be wrong. I did not know at the time *what* was “wrong” with me, that I was working-class and that the world around me was middle-class. I knew only that there was *something* profoundly wrong with me and that, wherever I turned, I hit yet another invisible threshold I was unable to pass through. This space between was

made evident in the way I was treated and through my experience of being outside of the middle-class world. My siblings and I were either bullied or completely ignored. My first experience of having my class interpolated onto me was when I was in the third grade at a slumber party at my best friend, Stacey's, house. During the party she pulled me aside, away from the other girls, and asked me, "Are you not ashamed of what your father does for a living?"

Her father was also a car salesman and so, one can imagine, she was asking me this question to quell her own shame (we can imagine she had had a similar experience of having her class interpolated onto her). I was not ashamed until she asked me, but from that point on, I felt shame. Not for having done anything, I didn't do anything, and not for what my father did — he, too, didn't do anything. I felt and continue to feel shame for who I am.

And yet, because I had no language or concepts with which to work through this experience, I didn't know what was happening. Over and over these encounters occurred and accrued. In high school neither myself nor my siblings were invited to meet with the college counselors on campus (who later I learned had met with my friends and classmates). I was teased and learned years later that people within my social circle called us "trailer trash" and "white trash." I was excluded without any explanation, while at the same time my mannerisms and references were pointed out by friends and authority figures as being inappropriate or wrong. Because I did not know why this was happening, I internalized all of these experiences — of which there were many — understanding them to be examples of the ways that I didn't fit into society; ways I was inherently wrong.

At the same time I was filled with a debilitating depression which alternated with instances of overwhelming rage. Not knowing why I was having these feelings, I read them as further evidence of my being a social outcast, unfit for society. I had always been a shy child, but by high school I

rarely spoke. My boyfriend's friends called me stupid and my favorite high school teacher, a history teacher, called me a wallflower. I felt alienated and ashamed.

I grew up with a basic belief in character. My father told me repeatedly, and modeled for me, the basic tenet that the suffering we experience forms us, creating character, and that character — not wealth, popularity, or power — is what matters in this life. My father's family came from Chihuahua, Mexico. His father, a peasant, somehow made his way with his family across the Mexican border and my father, one of thirteen children, grew up working on a farm in rural Wyoming. Because he had to help the family, he was not able to complete his education. He ran away from home when he was a teenager and joined the US Air Force, the only way he could have found work as a poor or working-class Mexican-American in the United States. When I was growing up, he held a number of jobs, jobs that required he work long hours, jobs that were not salaried. As a result, I rarely saw him, and during my childhood, though we always had a roof over our heads, clothing on our backs, and food, because my father's income fluctuated, our lives were precarious. And though my father worked during my entire childhood, he was never able to own a home.

In addition to my father's insistence on the building of character, I grew up with a strong sense of empathy; that I am not different from others who are suffering. The only difference being luck. While I was growing up there were a number of times when my parents invited strangers to stay with us. A woman with her mixed-race child, for example, stayed with us, in our home, when she was without work or housing. Telling the truth, taking only what you need, not wasting anything, these were all of equal importance. I never abandoned these beliefs and yet, even as a child, I could see that these beliefs were not important in the world. What was important was power, popularity. Being earnest, quiet, taking my time to think — these things got me bullied and ridiculed.

In high school I wore straight skirts and turtlenecks, black opaque stockings and Mary Janes, cardigans, and overcoats. My choice in clothing and the way I presented myself to the world was a form of language; a gesture. My style served as both a form of armor and a means with which to externalize my inner world. It is not an exaggeration to say that style, along with music (and the two are intrinsically connected), was what kept me alive during those years.

We bought our clothes at the local Goodwill Bargain Barn, a large barn-like structure in Santa Cruz off the main highway where clothes, appliances, toys, and other discarded junk were not displayed but simply set out in giant bins. We'd wait in our car in the parking lot until the warehouse opened at noon and then rush with the other families toward the entrance in the hope of finding something wonderful among the endless piles. We'd wander the aisles for hours — and I'd lose myself in the lost time, daydreaming, singing, alone in my own world. These early forays trained me in the art of gleaning — whether it was making do with nothing (no money, no food) or making artwork from the detritus of trauma and memory (a form of junk), culling from the archive, and/or from next to nothing (scavenging, hustling) — something which has been a lifelong practice, something I access and use on a daily basis.

Traipsing through the long wooden bins at the rummage warehouse, I'd scavenge for beige or white, black or brown — blouses or overcoats, cardigans or child-sized blazers, old leather satchels and plain matte pumps or loafers. Wearing simple styled clothing — sharp lines, classic styles, basic colors — helped me externalize my rage and depression. I was able to sublimate these overwhelming feelings, translating them into a precise language. At the same time, having a particular style that felt like an exact translation of my interior world also served to create a barrier between myself and the world, a world that I didn't much care for.

Before I knew anything about what mods were, I already knew intuitively all about them. I was already summoning their style. A deliberate creation by the working class in the United Kingdom, the mod is a direct relative of the dandy, of whom Camus wrote in *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, “The dandy creates his own unity by aesthetic means. But it is an aesthetic of singularity and of negation.”¹ The original dandy, also poor or working-class, made of himself an exaggeration of ruling-class culture, and by doing so pushed up against power. Like the mod or the punk, the dandy is in a static relationship with the culture he rejects. Like Anthony in *The Souvenir*, which we will discuss later, who is always too much, over-dramatic, a parody of the ruling class, the dandy pushes through the values of the ruling class and ends up entering into something else entirely. The original dandy is the symbol of the death drive: without any income, without a home, and yet dressed to kill. Like the anorexic, who is similarly without agency, who has similarly been pushed up against the wall, to the point of speechlessness, with nothing left to lose, the dandy has made of himself a symbol. He is a gesture; he has sublimated his overwhelming affects of rage and sorrow into this one act.

I’ve written elsewhere about contemporary anorexia and how it manifests among the marginalized, including the working class, and I bring it up here again because for me there is a connection. I was, at the time, anorexic (on and off, as I have been all my adult life), which is to say I was attempting to mold my body into a form that performed my interior. My attempts at controlling my body through controlling what I put into it has never been a desire to conform to society’s norms. Rather, it has been a prolonged insistence on making my body what I wanted to make of it: a language through which to convey my interior world but also, at the same time, a liminal space within which I could exist. I didn’t want to be dead but I also didn’t want to assimilate into the neoliberal culture I was surrounded by. Anorexia created an alternative world in which I could exist. And like

the mod and the dandy, who wear the attire of the middle class but then make it their own, taking it too far, anorexia also mixes signals. Her insistence on thinness appears as conformism, and yet it isn't, because she takes it too far. The result of true anorexia (not dieting to fit society's norms) is to set one's self apart. It is to become indigestible to the capitalist system. The anorexic is rage made manifest. It is a stance, Antigone's No without explanation. This is in part why people become so impatient with the anorexic, why there is so little empathy for her. She is not interested in compromise; she does not want what society is giving her. Her final gesture, her body, and her life, is formed into a vigilant refusal.

The original punk, too, is a symbol of a sneer, of refusal. They are also not interested in compromise, not about to protest or write letters to politicians. The symbolic weight of the punk in its original rendition was not about clothing or fashion but about resistance to the Thatcher government's neoliberal plans of austerity for the working class and poor and free markets for corporations and the rich. The performative aspect becomes its own language of resistance and, at the same time, becomes its own threshold between the world of the ruling class and the working class. This final act is often, though not always, annihilation: the anorexic's death by hunger (or other related complications) or the punk's drug overdose. Death, merely the final conclusion to the death drive.

The mod, too, sets themselves apart by being too bookish, too effeminate, too cosmopolitan for the working class, while, at the same time, too queer and too criminal for the middle class. Both the anorexic and the mod signify the alienation that they feel through externalization. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige writes, "Quietly disrupting the orderly sequence which leads from signifier to signified, the mods undermined the conventional meaning of 'collar, suit and tie', pushing neatness to the point of absurdity."²

I didn't know then that my social alienation was the direct result of my class and that my experience of being marginalized was too. The few friends I had at the time were also bullied. Some dropped out of high school, some ran away from home, moved to San Francisco where they became homeless. Some ended up addicted to drugs, some were forced to sell their bodies in order to survive. Many eventually killed themselves. By the time I left my hometown for college, most of the working-class kids I'd known were dead or had gone missing.

The town we lived in and the schools I attended were middle-class, and though I was never conscious of this, I imagined that my living amongst the middle class would somehow eventually make me middle-class too. Indeed, the entire world I was surrounded by was middle-class: the schools I attended, the people in my neighborhoods, the shops and institutions we visited, my friends and teachers. But beyond this, too, the world was middle-class, is middle-class: films and television shows, music, books, artwork, fashion, manners, and values — everything around me was (and still is) middle-class. As it has always been.

What this means or meant for me growing up was that on one hand I was aware intuitively that I didn't fit in, that there was something wrong with me, and that this "something wrong" was why I was unpopular, why I was ridiculed, why my siblings were similarly treated as pariahs. On the other hand, everything was middle-class. I was submerged in it.

Because I felt marginalized and outside of what I perceived as the "world," of course I wanted in. This created within me a complex mechanism. At once aspiration — believing if I just tried hard enough, if I were just smart enough, pretty enough, nice enough, I could win entry into the "world" — while, simultaneously, a visceral abhorrence to what I sensed as conformism. The way everything in the world appeared homogenous to me, the way everyone seemed to follow the same unspoken rules without giving it much, if any, thought.

The way this manifested in high school was that I was a straight-A student, attending Advanced Placement German and Shakespeare, and a long-distance runner, all the while I was also always working various working-class jobs (waitressing, for example). But also during high school I became a chain smoker and starting drinking in an attempt to quell my rage and anxiety, this overwhelming energy that seemed to cycle through my body. Not eating helped. I was always energetic, filled with life. As a small child I was curious. I remember asking my mother questions about the world, such as where the stars came from, and spent my days outside chasing animals. By the time I entered grammar school I sensed that being too much, seeming intense, was not a good thing. I wanted, however I could, to singe away the excess. I wanted — for one small moment — to feel nothing.

No one taught me about class, and I wouldn't begin to learn about it and the ways my working-class background informed every aspect of my life until decades later. And yet, though I didn't know anything about class or why I was ignored and ridiculed, I did know it had something to do with the world and the people in it. Certain types of music either quelled or met the preverbal, visceral sense I had about the world — and the way this translated into an unyielding energy. When I listened to David Bowie's Berlin trilogy, for example, it felt as if my interior world was being articulated — though in a monadic, poetic fashion. And when I listened to the early albums of the LA band X or of Hüsker Dü, the music and lyrics met my internalized rage and somehow, through this meeting of affects, I felt immense relief.

There weren't many working-class kids at school, it was predominantly middle-class. My classmates didn't say anything about my class to my face. Years later I learned that my classmates did in fact talk about my class — behind my back — labeling me and my friends “white trash” and “trailer trash.” In high school those of us who were working-class were outsiders. I

had a sense at the time, as I still do, when I came across working-class kids — a visceral sense of kinship.

There were two boys at school who liked me — who gave me gifts and asked me out. Both were rockabilly and both, I realized only decades later, were also from working-class families. They dressed in a retro, 1950s style: loose, hard denim jeans, black work boots or shoes, and clean white shirts. Jeremy owned a giant boat of a car and liked going to diners. Toby made me a mixtape of his favorite songs. Toby, a skater and surfer, had moved on to rockabilly from the punk scene, a natural extension: from one working-class resistance movement to another. Where punk began as a working-class rebellion against Thatcher and neoliberalism, it was quickly coopted by the culture, morphing into a performance of boredom and nihilism. Like everything subsumed by capitalism, what punks were resisting was lost by the time I was in high school. It didn't help that the lyrics of many of the bands tended to be abstract: anarchy and anger, yes, but aimed at no one in particular. Like early punk, rockabilly was solidly working-class.

There were very few people in my school who dressed the way Jeremy and Toby did. The art and drama students I knew were interested in new wave and anything that seemed to them to be “not old,” avant-garde, and “cool,” inhabiting a place of distance. Culture that doesn't engage with the world at large — the concrete and material conditions on the ground — or, if it does, it incorporates the symbolic terms or language of such conditions in order to capitalize on the “edginess” of them — using the word “capitalism,” for example, but without making any explicit reference to who specifically benefits from capitalism (the middle-class writer complaining about it) or how, or who suffers from it (the working class).

This distance is related to both the “coolness” of contemporary music, literature, and art (which cannot seem too angry or too “depressing,” for example), while at the same time is an accurate depiction of the middle-class, who exist in a separate world from the one where people don't have

enough food to eat or can't find employment. For the middle class, films, books, or music that present such a world are dystopic, depicting scenes that can't possibly be occurring in this world. For instance, in one writing workshop, an eminent writer described a chapter I presented, work informed by my teenage years living in an abandoned house with other teenagers in California, as "dystopian". It wasn't until many years later that I realized his comments, which I found shocking at the time, were rooted in his own class privilege; that he simply could not comprehend what I had described occurring in the US. Because it is the values and aesthetics of the middle class that pervade all aspects of the culture, and because it is the middle class who decide what work will be included in this middle-class world, it is nearly impossible for the working class to publish, show, or perform their work.

Because the working-class artist is tethered to their origins, a space that has not been assimilated into the middle-class world, our work will often be seen as anachronistic. And yet this anachronism is in itself a form of resistance. This insistence on the past drags it into the present, creating a glitch in the system. This has become ever truer as society has become more and more homogenous, with people buying the same clothing from the same handful of chain stores, watching the same Netflix series, listening to the same music. Everything disposable, recyclable with next season's reiteration of the same thing. Forward-looking, with a disdain for anything too "last season," we lose our present as we lose our past. In contrast, by insisting on the past and by dragging it into the present, through artifacts such as specific clothing or music of another time, the rockabilly and the mod become, through their mere existence, acts of resistance to the status quo.

The worship of progress is nothing new of course, and is, in its ideology, inherently anti-working class. Progress is a middle-class ideology, an ideology of the status quo. Their idea of progress is superficial and anti-

revolutionary. Instead of overthrowing the political system, middle-class liberals want to make cosmetic, and not systemic, changes to the system — without interrupting or engaging with structures of oppression. You see this in contemporary progressives, whose proposals for change are superficial and do not interrupt or engage with the structures of oppression.

This holds true for the art and literary worlds as well, where what is considered avant-garde is decided and created by the middle class. Whereas work that is truly new is inherently disruptive to social hierarchies, and as a result is kept outside the art and literary canons by gatekeepers who make such distinctions based on what can be grafted onto what is already well within the canon. By definition, what is original appears strange because it is unlike any previous work and thus shocking. Furthermore, by creating terms such as “outsider art,” “primitive art,” and “Art-brut,” middle-class art historians are able to label work that does not fit into already established modes, work that tends to be made by artists not already inculcated within the middle-class art and literary worlds, as backward and inferior.

My rockabilly suitors had a worldview that stood in sharp contrast to the majority of my high school classmates. Rooted in the past, their clothing, their references, and their mannerisms interrupted the neoliberal ideals of those around us, whose ideas about “real” art and culture were connected to the idea of progress and a blind faith in the future. They preferred the readymade new wave bands with their sleek music and presentation; their lyrics emptied of meaning and their music overly professional. I should say none of this has to do with the use of electronics.

When, for instance, I listen to David Bowie’s Berlin trilogy, his collaboration with Brian Eno, although the songs are constructed primarily from electronics, there is a kind of static inscribed in the music. Silence inhabits these moments of static. Furthermore, these intervals or ruptures result in spaces where a dialectic, a form of question arises, and with it, another, entirely new, possibility. At the same time, within these hesitations

or pauses a kind of death enters. A form of haunting or ghosting. These instances of dialectical thinking, or what Walter Benjamin called “historical awakening,” are moments when the present and the past appear as one, and access to a forgotten past becomes possible. In other words, it is by looping back into the past through these momentary gaps and fissures that we can access the forgotten moments of the past and, by including them in our work, redeem these shards of the past, the history, and the lives that have been forgotten.

When you listen to Kraftwerk or any of the albums from the Berlin trilogy, there is a dark undercurrent within which one feels a sense of haunting, where the past seems to enter. This is juxtaposed to overproduced, readymade albums, which are flat and slick, with over-dubbed vocals and music — meaning existing on the surface. Such work, in music, film, or literature, is the opposite of that which includes ruptures — gaps, static, or other means of introducing complexity and contradiction. This is akin to how Walter Benjamin describes the work of the press. It is not their intention for the reader to experience what is being conveyed. Rather, he writes, “its intention is just the opposite, and it is achieved: to isolate events from the realm in which they could affect the experience of the reader.”³ This is one glaring difference, for example, between punk, post-punk, and new wave. While new wave was affiliated with pop music, tending to be readymade bands with a slick packaging and sound, punk and post-punk were, for the most part, working-class bands who were explicitly resisting capitalist culture.

During high school I was angry most of the time, and when I wasn’t angry, I was depressed. I knew the world was to blame, that power and inequality were part of the problem, but I had no way of knowing that the rage and overwhelming sorrow I felt all the time was the result of my class. I began drinking and smoking. In photographs of myself at the time I appear to have only two moods: rage and melancholia.

I met Melanie when I was a junior. The first time I saw her she was standing alone on the terrace on the second floor of our high school building. She had shoulder-length chestnut brown hair cut into a loose bob. She was tall and thin, with a boyish body, wearing a straight, crimson, wool, knee-length skirt, a fitted black, ribbed turtleneck, and black flats. I was alone, as always, trying to look busy, trying to make myself invisible, walking the long corridors, trying to waste time until lunch period was over. Melanie was standing alone, too, leaning up against the wooden fence of the corridor balcony. I don't remember who said hello first but one of us did. We were friends immediately.

I spent my afternoon and weekends at Melanie's. She lived in a nondescript apartment with her father who was never home, always at work. In fact, I don't recall ever having met him. She and I spent hours out on her balcony smoking or sitting on the floor of her apartment, staring at her poster of the Jam, listening to the same albums on repeat. *Setting Sons* was my favorite. I loved the songs "Saturday's Kids," "Burning Sky," and "Wasteland." No, that's not true. I loved all of them. But I also loved all their albums. Though in the UK the Jam were immensely popular, reaching the top of the charts, in the States no one I knew had heard of them.

Both Melanie and I had crushes on Paul Weller, the band's singer and songwriter. It's true, he was cute and he had impeccable style, but there was something else. A good part of this "something else" is the libidinal. His thin, wired body seemed packed with energy. In other words, he was able to move his rage and all the unbound energy within that into his music-making, his singing, and finally into his very body. In the end, the Jam, and also at the same time Paul Weller's body, becomes the very essence, the very embodiment of class rage. And yet, it's different from punk, which, for instance, in the performances of the Germs, becomes raw chaos, absolute rage unleashed. Which of course is what punk is. But the Jam were

different: it was more precise, exact, a controlled substance, a slow, excruciating burn.

Unlike other British bands, who performed using a faux-American accent, Paul Weller made no attempt to hide his British working-class accent. The band, its presentation, music, and lyrics are a one-to-one direct sublimation from their working-class backgrounds. For example, the song “Saturday’s Kids” from the album *Setting Sons* is rooted entirely in Weller’s working-class hometown of Woking:

Saturday’s boys live life with insults
Drink lots of beer and wait for half-time results
Afternoon tea in the light-a-bite
Chat up the girls, they dig it!
Saturday’s girls work in Tesco’s and Woolworths
Wear cheap perfume ’cause it’s all they can afford
Go to discos they drink Babycham
Talk to Jan, in bingo accents.

Watching Weller’s lithe, frenetic body on stage is to watch a caged animal — imprisoned by the class system. His body never stops moving, his mouth jammed up, chewing a wad of gum. He was able, somehow, to put into words things I was not able, yet, to articulate. Things happening inside me I could neither locate nor manage. It was in the point-blank lyrics, but it was also in his style, his posture, and his mannerisms. He externalized class, and what it had done and was doing to him, and then he performed class for the rest of us. And though I knew nothing about any of this at the time, it still saved me. I knew I was not alone, and that there was something secret that we shared, something integral to both of our beings. As Weller sings in “Start”: “Knowing that someone in this world feels as desperate as me.”

Rather than an abstract “Fuck You” at “the system,” Weller sang about the working class, articulating how it felt to work a shitty, meaningless job

for low pay. He sang about his rage at capitalism, at Tory politicians. He sang about the middle class and how the working class were exploited. And he sang about the resulting depression. His songs were addressed to us, to the working class. They were not written *about* the working class, for the middle class. Here, from “That’s Entertainment”:

Waking up at six am on a cool warm morning
Opening the windows and breathing in petrol
An amateur band rehearsing in a nearby yard
Watching the telly and thinking about your holidays

Written in the form of a list, a series of moments written in the now, taken from quotidian working-class life — not imaginary, not fictionalized, not cleaned up, made slick, but also not the opposite, made into caricature. What we have is reality, what life looks and feels like for the working class. In this way, it’s akin to the later writings of Clarice Lispector, which we will discuss later in the book, who also writes from the moment, dropping the quotidian into the text, like diary entries. It could also be compared to Laura Grace Ford’s project *Savage Messiah* — which I write about in more depth in the conclusion — where she chronicles how London’s working-class neighborhoods were bulldozed over for the slick, new, class-cleansed London:

Driscoll House, Harper road. William the IV
miserable drum with circular bar. Rockingham
estate, traces of riots, dints on the pavements
where crowbars and TVs were dropped over balcony
railings. 1976, scorched terraces and battered
sofas, pyramid speaker cabs and LCC blocks
reverberating in the searing heat.⁴

Like Ford, in his song lyrics Weller includes the people, places and objects from his hometown. His songs for the Jam are immediate, and as a result what is relayed is actually experienced by the listener, rather than just being described to them. We feel the depression, the poverty, the hopelessness. And we feel the justified rage pervading through all the songs. Weller's working-class hometown of Woking and its community is lifted up into the song. This fragment or shard of working-class history, through Weller's inclusion, becomes bound in the fabric of the song, making it into an archive. This type of artwork, that includes both the actual objects and experiences of a lived life placed within the movement of music, becomes a means of both preserving and reigniting the past.

In his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Walter Benjamin describes Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* as an attempt to produce experience synthetically. He writes, "Where there is experience [*Erfahrung*] in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine in the memory [*Gedächtnis*] with material from the collective past."⁵ This intricate web, or what he calls the *Textum*, is the prose of what Benjamin describes as the storyteller, one who weaves his own experience into his work and, as a result of this weaving, also drags his community, as well as his community's history, with him.

Melanie and I styled ourselves on what we imagined a female Weller might look like: wispy, thin, boyish, in knee-length, straight skirts, black opaque stockings, simple one-tone blouses, matte black flats, and beige or cream-colored wool cardigans. I wore a thick ribbon in my hair as a headband. On weekends we watched *Quadrophenia* and listened to the Jam on repeat. We sat on the porch of her father's apartment and smoked. We didn't do much else. There wasn't much of anything else we could do.

We were always already behind — it was 1986 and the Jam had already broken up by 1982 — but time didn't mean anything to us. School meant waiting for the 3:15 bell to ring so we could come home and listen to

records and smoke cigarettes. Afternoons and weekends were spent wasting the hours doing *nothing*: listening to Jam albums and smoking. Life was about making do and then finding pockets of time to lose ourselves in.

The Jam were the perfect antidote. Here was a band that was addressing the frustrations of the working class. Weller sang about the relentless grind, the boredom and frustration of giving your days away to shitty bosses who cared nothing for you or your family, just to earn a living. The Jam's depression was no different than Joy Division's. Instead, the difference was that the Jam were externalizing it, talking about the very systems that resulted in their depression. And by doing this, by externalizing the shame, rage, depression, confusion, and hopelessness, the Jam were able to see the thing for what it was: social class and the effects of neoliberalism. Though it's true that knowledge is never enough, it's also true that without knowledge, we have nothing.

Joy Division can be seen as the opposite side of the Jam. Also British, also working-class, also suffering under Thatcher and the Tories — but Joy Division were solidly on the other side: they were deep in. So deep, they couldn't see out from it. Both the Jam and Joy Division were thinking about time. With Joy Division it had to do with a melancholia for a lost past and for what Mark Fisher called hauntology, the grief for a future we had been promised but that never came to fruition. But the Jam, a mod band, were trying to stretch and bend time. The mod is always trying to locate an index of time within which to drop into. In other words, the mod is always on the lookout for exit routes from the limitations of their social class: wasting hours after their nine-to-five in dusty basement book or record shops, spending nights in music clubs and weekends on excursions to the shore. To not be confined to a life of work and recovery from it, the mod works hard at creating a third space where life might be lived, and not just survived. As Ian Penman writes in his essay "Even if You Have to Starve," "The early

Mods were navigators, Magellans of the postwar field of leisure time, which had to be imagined, cast in this or that shape.”⁶

This insistence on locating time despite being working-class is paramount. The working class are meant by definition to work and recover, then work again. We are not meant to have leisure time, by which I mean: time to waste, time to do nothing. For the working class, to make leisure time is to sacrifice. Those of us who choose to create leisure time by working less will necessarily suffer as a direct consequence. Working less means less or no health insurance for one, but also means going without essentials. To choose leisure is also to appear lazy. Only the middle-class and rich have leisure built into their lives, in the form of vacations and summer or weekend homes, free evenings as a result of having the ability to hire nannies or babysitters, or simply by either not having to work, or not having to work as many jobs or hours as the working class as a result of their high salaries.

Even if the working class does somehow find a means to locate leisure time, this leisuring is often construed as loitering. The word “loiter” comes from the Middle Dutch word *loteren*, which means “to lurk” and is related to the word “beggar.” The word “leisure,” in contrast, means “free time, time at one’s disposal” and also the “opportunity to do something, chance, occasion, an opportune time,” and “opportunity afforded by freedom from necessary occupations.” Where “loiter” signifies dereliction and the absence of work, with its relation to begging and lurking, “leisure” represents the freedom of not having to work. When “loiter” is used, usually on signs forbidding such action in restaurants, shops, and open public spaces, the warning is addressed to “beggars” and “lurkers,” which is to say the poor and the working class. Folded into the two similar yet distinct meanings, then, is social class: to be working-class or poor and to have leisure time is to warrant suspicion, while to be middle-class and to have free time is to have leisure, to have opportunity. It is also striking that the word “afford” is

included in the definition for leisure, making this class difference transparent.

Leisure time, time in which one might ponder, think, or simply zone out, a kind of “dumb time,” is essential. Without this time, it is not possible to make original work. It is also not possible to make good quality work. But having time to waste, to do nothing, time to kill, is also time to daydream, to dissociate, and without this time, our every hour is filled with work, which is to say all our time is used up. As a result, we become automatons.

In “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin describes two kinds of memories: *mémoire volontaire* and *mémoire involontaire*. He explains that although Proust attempted to, he was never able to recall his childhood by force of will. Instead, by chance, when eating a madeleine, he was flooded by memories of his upbringing. Benjamin describes the former, Proust’s attempt to voluntarily recall memory, as *mémoire volontaire*, and the second, his chance encounter, as *mémoire involontaire*. Both types of memory are necessary for the storyteller to retrieve and carry history and memory into the present — and bring this lived experience to the reader. Without *mémoire involontaire*, the work is flat, the writing like that found in newspapers, what Benjamin describes as intentionally separating facts and dates out from experience in order that the reader not experience what she is reading. As he writes, “If it were the intention of the press to have the reader assimilate the information it supplies as part of his own experience, it would not achieve its purpose.”⁷

Benjamin’s *mémoire involontaire* is the result of moments of life we do not experience, when, for instance, we encounter trauma or when we are lost in thought. This can be compared to Freud’s concept of what happens when one experiences shock, when what is happening is too much for our psyche to handle. When this occurs, memory can be shocked from consciousness. The memory, though recorded in our minds, remains

repressed. When one has access to leisure time and is able to do nothing, then one can zone out or dissociate, walk without an aim in mind, sit at the table for hours doing nothing, and so on. These time-wasting activities can bring about dissociation, and moments of zoning out such as drawing, writing poetry, walking, or making music or art can bring about instances similar to Proust's chance enactor with the madeleine. Without such downtime, one is always in what Benjamin called "day-to-day-goal-oriented living," which destroys the possibility of *mémoire involontaire*, which for Benjamin is construed in the night and is destroyed by daylight:

However, with our purposeful activity and, even more, our purposeful remembering, each day unravels the web, the ornaments of forgetting. This is why Proust finally turned his days into nights, devoting all his hours to undisturbed work in his darkened room with artificial illumination, so that none of those intricate arabesques might escape him.⁸

The ability to do nothing is a luxury, and one not intended for the working class. This is why this aspect of the mod lifestyle is so important. The mod resists being made into mere labor. This resistance is an insistence on the working-class subject as intellect, as musician and artist, as surplus (not mere body as labor). In *Subculture*, Dick Hebdige writes, "Somewhere on the way home from school or work, the mods went 'missing,': they were absorbed into a 'noonday underground' (Wolfe, 1969) of cellar clubs, discotheques, boutiques and record shops which lay hidden beneath the 'straight world' against which it was ostensibly defined."⁹

At the time my boyfriend was attending parties at UCSC and visiting universities where he could study painting. He had tutors for his high school classes and in preparation for taking the SAT. His mother was involved in a number of philanthropy projects, his father worked for IBM. In contrast, my father commuted two hours each day to sell cars in Monterey, we lived in rented, not owned, homes, and education past high school was nowhere on

the periphery: not because we were not interested but because we didn't know anything about it. One evening my boyfriend told me, in an offhanded way, that we could never get married because we were from different classes. He said this even though we shared the same interests, dressed in a similar fashion, lived in the same neighborhoods, and attended the same school. Social class, in other words, this divide he was referring to, is not visible. It is rather invisible, as a kind of surplus between us.

But what my boyfriend was alluding to, what he most probably knew but only intuitively (class is not discussed, considered as it is, crude and abhorrent to conversation), was not so much that our families had a different relationship to financial capital, but rather that his family had more social and cultural capital than mine. Indeed, my parents had no social or cultural capital at all. My mother, an immigrant, had no social connections in her home country nor in her adopted one. My father, Mexican-American, the child of an Indigenous Mexican peasant, grew up in poverty, working in the fields. He, like my mother, also had no social connections. Neither of my parents had attended college, and so the very idea that college was a possibility was not within any field of knowledge. That there were tests and tutors and classes, both private and institutional, that might prepare me not only for college but for applying to college, was also not something I, nor anyone in my family, was aware of. When I finished high school, my parents bought me a pizza and a cake and we celebrated. My high school graduation, in other words, was seen by my family, and myself, as my final educational achievement. Meanwhile, my boyfriend, who had had tutors during high school, who had attended an SAT preparatory course, whose parents had both attended college, was preparing to begin his first year of undergraduate study at UC Berkeley.

In other words: class is not simply about money and one's profession — it is also about the invisible, unsaid, and unseen facets of capital. When my boyfriend said he couldn't marry me because we were from different

classes, he wasn't necessarily talking about money or material goods (though this was also true). What he was alluding to were these invisible markers of privilege I would remain ignorant to for my entire adult life. Privilege handed down to him through his family and his family's family. As Pierre Bourdieu writes in "The Forms of Capital," "It follows that the transmission of cultural capital is no doubt the best hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital, and it therefore receives proportionately greater weight in the system of reproduction strategies, as the direct, visible forms of transmission tend to be more strongly censored and controlled."¹⁰

This was evident in my boyfriend's access to cultural currency, for instance, and the ways he had been, through his social class, introduced organically to the arts. He had been absorbed in it, while I, on the other hand, had learned about it. It is through these seemingly inconsequential nuances that class is experienced. These small nuances add up. Growing up absorbed in art and having natural access to cultural currency gives one a sense of ease. This informs all aspects of one's being: the way one enters a room, holds their body, speaks, looks at others. And this is recognized among others as evidence of self-esteem, which is evidence of self-worth.

None of these class divides were apparent to me at the time — that, for instance, the only friends I had in high school were also from working-class backgrounds, that the two boys who liked me were also from the working class. This is not, of course, to say the boys or my friends liked me because we were from the same class. Rather, it is to say that there was something beneath that drew us to each other, something unsaid.

Weller founded the Jam when he was a teenager. By the time he was twenty-four, he had already quit the band and formed his second project, The Style Council. The Jam's name came from Weller's little sister one morning at breakfast when she said "jam," and it struck Weller that that name was it. I don't know how Weller came up with the name the Style Council. Weller was raised in council housing in Woking. Perhaps Weller

named the band after council housing, an act of brilliance on a number of counts. First of all, it is to resist aspiration, a radical act of embodying where he came from and not turning away from it. But also, the combination of the words “Style” and “Council” is an act of genius because it challenges the reader’s conception of council housing. Because he places the word “Style” next to “Council,” we are shown another reality, one not usually imagined by a middle-class audience. Placing the two words together creates a dialectic. For the middle class, who usually imagine the working class as lazy, stupid, dirty, and disheveled, this title forces them to reconsider what both words mean — separately and then together. The two words, words that the middle class would never place together, two words that would seem galaxies apart from one another, disrupt easy assumptions and stereotypes.

When I discovered the Style Council, I loved them just as much as I loved the Jam. While the Jam was jammed-up energy, the Style Council was both more celebratory and more explicitly political. Where the Jam’s lyrics, music, and delivery was frenetic, bottled-up, incoherent at times, performing rage and sorrow, the Style Council was clear about its mission, which was to deliver the politics of the working class. While Weller appeared angry and inarticulate and the Jam, overall, delivered a simpler, punk rock message vis a vis performance, Weller in the Style Council appeared in pastels, sporting loafers and polos, more effeminate, even androgynous.

When the Jam arrived in their smart dark suits and their thin ties, their cropped hair, they appeared the polar opposite of punk bands of the time, such as the Sex Pistols and the Clash. The Jam was managed by Weller’s father. The band didn’t use drugs and they had no qualms about courting the top ten. Such behavior can appear on the surface to be conservative and what most would consider not punk. But I suppose the meaning of the words “punk” and “conservative” are contingent on who is using them. The

word “conserve” means “to keep safe, preserve from loss or decay,” thus, the act of not abandoning one’s working-class background and of lifting it into one’s art work can be described as an act of conservation. Furthermore, if to be punk means to resist capitalist society, to resist assimilation, then refusing to abandon one’s working-class origins is absolutely punk. Staying true to one’s working-class origins may also mean being fine with having one’s songs in the Top 10. In fact, the abhorrence of this — the idea that being popular is an indication that an artwork is not good — is a form of elitism. The fetishizing of niche tastes is just one more means of creating capital cachét. In “Going Overground,” Mark Fisher writes that “the Jam were public property, and that was the point.”¹¹ Fisher describes hearing the Jam for the first time while at the barber and on television on the Top Forty. I was shocked when I learned that the Jam were a popular band in the UK, that their songs were in the Top 10. It was incredible to me that it wasn’t just mods or Jam fanatics listening to their songs, songs where they were telling the middle class and the government to fuck off — it was also the middle class and the government.

Weller created the Style Council with Mick Talbot in 1982. In 1984 the singer Dee C. Lee, Weller’s girlfriend, joined the band. The band were together until 1989 and during those seven years they performed with a rotating group of artists. In 1984 Weller put together a group of musicians called the Council Collective to make the charity album *Soul Deep*. The aim of the album was to raise money for striking miners. Its songs were more overtly political than the songs Weller wrote for the Jam — they actively attacked Margaret Thatcher and the middle class. In the song “Soul Deep,” Weller sings:

Getcha mining soul deep with a lesson in history
There’s people fighting for their communities
Don’t say this struggle does not involve you
If you’re from the working class this is your struggle too

This is one of my all-time favorite Style Council songs. In it, Weller writes about the miners' struggles and the Tory party. Undergirding the song is the overall theme of unity: that the working class is united by our social class and our mutual struggles. On the B-side of the album is an interview with two of the miners. Indeed, one of the members of the Council Collective, Jimmy Ruffin, had personal experience with mining: his own father, according to Munday's *The Jam and Paul Weller: Shout to the Top*, had been a miner too. "My father," Ruffin explained, "had been a miner back in the States and I can empathise with the plight of the British Miners. I know what it's like, coal mining is in my family."¹²

It's impossible now to imagine a band, let alone a popular band, writing and performing songs critiquing capitalism in this way. And by critiquing capitalism I don't mean just dropping signifiers into a song. With the Style Council there is no confusion over what the songs are about (the lives of the working-class under capitalism) and who the songs are written for (the working-class). There is no such thing in the contemporary music world. It's important, too, to note that this was also not standard at the time — other popular bands of the era were not singing overtly about the British government.

"Soul Deep" featured three of the main musicians of the Style Council — Paul Weller, Mick Talbot, and Dee C. Lee — as well as Jimmy Ruffin, Junior Giscombe, Dizzy Hites, and Vaughan Toulouse. About the album, Weller's biographer wrote, "Paul didn't hold back and 'Money' was not only a virulent attack on the Tories, but many of the other institutions that ran Britain including the Americans."¹³ Releasing a song against the Tory party and for the miners was a gamble: the British middle class was strictly conservative. And yet, from the start, Weller had always done what he wanted and had always stayed true to his working-class origins and the values inherent to it.

The following album, *Our Favourite Shop*, included the single “Walls Come Tumbling Down.” Like his previous songs, “Walls Come Tumbling Down” is not abstract, does not use metaphors. Instead, it takes aim directly at Margaret Thatcher, the Tory government, and the ways the rich and powerful use and exploit the workers. Indeed, the song, like many of the songs by the Style Council, is fused with energy, and is a call-to-arms for members of the working class to come together and fight:

Are you gonna get to realize
The class war's real and not mythologized

“Homebreakers,” from the same album, was written in response to Norman Tebbit, Secretary of State for Employment under Thatcher, and his statement that if you can't find work in the place you live, you should just leave to find work elsewhere. This statement suggests that leaving one's working-class home, neighborhood, family, and friends is irrelevant. Such a remark would not be directed at the middle class, of course. And yet, the idea that one ought to leave behind everything they know simply in order to earn money is expected of the working class:

And I've tried on my own
Now there's nothing to keep me at home
Like my brother has too
Gotta leave to get out of this view
You see they, tell you to move around
If you can't find work in your own town

Such commentary is now, in the United States at least, no longer questioned. Indeed, nearly every artist discussed in this book is the result of this thinking, a thinking that encourages the working class to abandon their families and communities in order to make a living. And, of course, leaving

one's working-class origins means assimilation. Weller did leave Woking, but he never severed his connection to the town or his working-class origins. This is critical. Though leaving one's working-class home does, necessarily, result in a type of death — of the self, of the actual day-to-day experience of living in one's working-class community among one's family, friends, neighbors, shops, community centers, objects, and landscape — when we carry this world within us, we can, in some sense, preserve who we are.

Other songs on the album, like “Welcome to Milton Keynes,” critique the artificial new towns that had begun to appear throughout Britain and the cul-de-sac houses that all look exactly the same (what we in the US call McMansions), and Thatcher, in “The Lodgers (or She Was Only a Shopkeeper's Daughter),” featuring Dee C. Lee singing the following lyrics:

No peace for the wicked only war on the poor
They're battling on pickets trying to even the score
It's all inclusive and the dirt comes free
And you can be all that you want to be
Oh, an equal chance and an equal say
But equally there's no equal pay
There's room on top if you toe the line
And if you believe all this you must be out of your mind

As we shall see later, although musicians such as Jason Molina and Mark Linkous perform their working-class background by collecting objects and including text and other references in their lyrics, for instance, they do not explicitly address the hegemonic powers or their ideologies that result in class antagonism. Like Molina and Linkous, however, Weller also includes references to the objects and landscape of his working-class origins. In addition, in his songs both from the Jam and the Style Council, Weller

speaks directly to the working class, never making any attempt to assimilate into the middle class. As a result, there is no risk of fetishizing the working class or of being misunderstood.

I didn't know any of this. I only knew that I felt alienated. I imagined New York City as I'd seen it in movies, or better yet in the black-and-white archival footage of Andy Warhol's Factory. I spent hours of my senior year sitting before the small TV screen watching the same images on repeat. I loved Warhol's films: the graininess, the awkward moments caught on camera, the way time warped inside the seemingly endless films where the actors appeared bored one moment and filled with exuberance and delight the next. The footage stood in stark relief to the world I lived in, where a kind of sleek perfection was admired. In contrast, Warhol's films featured the working class and the poor, hustlers, drag queens, the queer Berlin sisters, the working-class transgender superstar Candy Darling, and the always bewildered, child-like, drug-addicted heiress Edie Sedgwick. The two-hour-plus films implied leisure, infinite time, and in this aimlessness, there was a resistance to the aspiration and competition I saw in the world around me.

I didn't know that the problem was my social class and that wherever I went I'd drag it along with me. In fact, I didn't know what I was doing. Without being conscious of it, I was making a decision that would haunt me for the rest of my life. If I stayed in my hometown I would be annihilated. Like the final scene in Claire Denis' film, *High Life*, where the main character, Monte, and his daughter, escape in a space shuttle out into nowhere, I knew I had to leave, even if leaving killed me.

CHAPTER TWO

DEATH SHUTTLE INTO THE WORLD

My life died long ago.

— Antigone

When I graduated from high school my parents ordered a large cheese pizza from my favorite pizza shop and a birthday cake with Oreos and we celebrated. But while I was celebrating my high school graduation, I learned years later, my classmates were preparing to go away to college. By this time, we were no longer living in the same town as the public schools we'd attended. For my last year in high school, we lived in an apartment complex in Santa Cruz, my sister and I sharing a bedroom.

After high school I continued to work at the same low-paying jobs I had during high school — waitressing, for the most part. Because I grew up in the United States, post-Reagan (and Thatcher), I came of age in the culture of neoliberalism, which is to say I was trained to believe — through culture, the media, the education system, my interactions with friends and acquaintances — that we are all born equal, with the same advantages and disadvantages, and that it is up to each of us to succeed. If I fail, it is my own fault, and not the result of society. How, then, does such a belief inform how I view my father, a man who worked his entire life, who was not able to complete his schooling because he had to work in the fields? According to the culture I was raised on, my father's "failure" (his being working-class and not having material, social, or cultural capital) was his own fault.

The connection between melancholia and social class is as follows: at that moment in the third grade when Stacey asked me whether I was ashamed of my father for what he did for a living, for being working-class,

I became aware of my social class. Before this, I was unaware of it. In that moment, I became self-conscious. Though I did not understand social class or how it worked, and would not for many years, I was, in that moment, aware of my place in its hierarchical system. I knew, then, that I existed at the bottom.

As the years passed, I became filled with a rage I could not contain but had no language for. My father was a hard worker, I was a hard worker — a straight-A, honor student, I spent my free time reading books and won all the spelling bees. I hadn't done anything wrong, neither had my father. In fact, my father worked so many hours during my childhood that I rarely saw him. Why, I wondered then, and why, I wonder now, is being a car salesman something one ought to be ashamed of? I still don't know.

The symbol of the “car salesman,” like other symbolic representations of the working class, serves to keep the working class in our place. It is important to point out, as Bourdieu noted, that it is those in power who create such classifications. We, those of us whose lives are organized and constrained by these classifications, these prejudices, have but two choices. Either we can resist these attempts by society to interpolate shame onto us, which is to say not to sever our connection to our social class, our family, our home and, in essence, ourselves, or we can believe what society is telling us about ourselves and attempt to assimilate into the very culture that despises who we are and where we come from.

What undergirds all of this is an antagonism. The ruling class owns the means of production, and have as their aim the maintenance of their capital. Whether or not I want nice things, what I wear, or how I speak has very little to do with this fundamental truth. If I look back now at my boyfriend in high school or my rage at society, and every encounter with gatekeepers along the way — in high school, college, graduate school, the literary world, academia — these are all defined by antagonism, and the gatekeepers' insistence that I not be allowed in.

When I left my hometown, I looked back with rage. I told myself: I will leave this place and I will become something. I didn't know then what I might become, I knew only that I had to leave, that if I stayed I would continue to work low-paying jobs with no security, living from paycheck to paycheck for the rest of my life. If I stayed, I would die — through the repercussions of poverty, through drugs or alcohol. I'd seen this already, watched my friends die before they reached their twenties.

After asking my father if we could have a “talk,” I told him, in a diner in downtown Santa Cruz, that I was thinking of going to college. He did not react, except to tell me that whatever I chose to do with my life, he would support. He has always insisted on this: that whatever I wanted to do, I could do, and he would support me in my efforts. He added that anyone can become educated, but that it takes a person with character to get an education and remain the same person they were before. He stressed the importance of being able to talk to anyone, the busgirl at the local diner or an academic, to remain what I'd call “down to earth.” In other words, he was saying that I could leave, I could attend college, but I must never forget who I was, where I came from. I have always considered my father, a man who was unable to complete his own education because he had to work, to be one of the most thoughtful and philosophical people I have ever met. This remains true to this day. He is a quiet man; he doesn't speak much. And most of what he has taught me about ethics and character I have learned through the way he has lived his life.

At the age of twenty-two, as the first in my family to attend college, I enrolled in the local community college. I received a scholarship and during the award ceremony I was asked to say something at the podium. I don't remember much, but I do recall saying that I wanted an education so that I could speak on behalf of those who are silenced and marginalized. I eventually transferred to Mills College in Oakland, a private women's college, where I earned a BA in English. Before I applied, I told my

boyfriend, the same boyfriend from high school, who was studying at UC Berkeley at the time, that I was planning to apply to Mills College. He replied, without hesitation, “You can’t.” Years later, during my final semester of college, when the idea of applying to a PhD program in literature surfaced in my mind, I asked the chair of the department for guidance and he told me the exact same thing: “You can’t”. He said this seemingly without thought, without explanation. He said this to me despite the fact that he had not been a professor of mine and that my grades were above average, that I had competed on the cross-country team, had participated in student government, and was awarded first prize for the college poetry contest. Because this was the chair of my department, because I had been directed to him by my own English professors when I asked them for guidance, I took his word as the truth. I assumed he knew better. I wouldn’t think of applying to a doctoral program again for another twenty years.

I grew up believing that if I just worked hard enough (attended college, challenged my intellect, worked more than my peers) there was no way I would not be a success. The very definition of success, of course, meant moving out of my class. Part of my desire to leave my hometown was fueled by a wish to prove myself to all those who had tried, over the years, to keep me in my place. This desire fed my ambition, my compulsive perfectionism, and my unwitting compliance, which, in turn, became an unconscious (and this is crucial) desire to flee my class background.

The society I grew up in, ruled by the middle class, was and remains entirely middle-class. When I look in magazines or books, watch films or TV shows, when I talk to my colleagues and other writers and my students, there always seems to be the same handful of middle-class writers referenced. These books are referenced by the middle-class writers they read about in literary journals. And these middle-class writers write from a middle-class point of view, which is to say from a distance and, for the most

part, this means not about the concrete, real world in which the majority of people live. This massive deployment of values and beliefs, aesthetics and desires, is a form of indoctrination, one we remain, for the most part, unaware of. Rather than confronting the working class with their values and aesthetics, insisting we adhere to them, the middle class simply present their beliefs and aesthetics as natural, as the world.

These ideas, values, and experiences of the dominant class are validated in public discourse and, again, are simply considered the norm, while those of the working class are not. To veer from this boundary of what is imagined as a shared world, is to be considered on the fringe, an outlier, and to engage in behaviors that don't align with these seemingly natural values and ideas is to engage in taboo. Gramsci writes that the hegemonic culture does not need to rely on forms of brainwashing but, rather, utilizes public discourse to make some forms of experience seem natural while ignoring others. This powerful yet more subtle means of coercion works on the individual. When, for example, I experienced numerous forms of gatekeeping, because the term social class had been removed from discourse, I had no way of understanding these actions other than to believe they were related to me: that I was being excluded because I was somehow flawed. This internal divide is what Gramsci refers to as a "contradictory consciousness," the result of the chasm between the lived experience of the working class and the internalized ideology, what Gramsci called "common sense."

Not knowing that the slights I experienced, and the many ways I was kept out of middle-class institutions, were connected to a broader, political system, and had, in actuality, nothing to do with me personally, with nothing but the world to turn to, I turned to the world. And the world told me that by improving myself I could succeed. In turn, I worked, wrote, read, and studied more, believing that these aspirational actions would propel me out of my fate, a death by poverty and illness, and into a life

where I could be someone else. In order to survive, in other words, I understood I had to kill myself off.

In Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* he writes of the inherent contradictions in the working-class subject. He writes that the working class has "its own conception of the world, even if only embryonic; a conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally and in flashes."¹ At the same time, he wrote, the working class also "adopted a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group."² The result of this contradiction, Gramsci wrote, is that the working-class subject has

two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed.³

Furthermore, this society ruled through class hierarchy implicitly denies that there is any such class struggle.

In order to write, let alone think, about social class, we need to have a language for it. And yet we don't. Or, rather, everyday working-class people don't. In my own studies in graduate school — a public, not private, university — when I learned about the Frankfurt School, Marx, or Walter Benjamin, the political and social components were surgically removed. We learned, for instance, about Marx's theory of the fetish and Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" as if their writings were lyrical essays without any connection to social class. Gramsci wrote that "every language contains the elements of a conception of the world,"⁴ and that the language available marks the boundaries between what is and is not permissible, discouraging the clarification of possible alternatives, making it difficult for the oppressed to locate the source of their unease.

After I graduated from college I moved as far away from California as possible without leaving the country. In Boston, I was working as a copyeditor for a financial firm while contemplating applying to graduate programs in creative writing. Everyone I knew at the time told me not to. Despite this, one year later, I enrolled in an MFA graduate writing program in New York, a thirty-minute commuter-train ride from Manhattan. I had, in my mind, made it. Despite all the people who had told me I was incapable; I was determined to become a writer.

As a student on an MFA writing program, I assumed everyone knew more than I did about poetry. Though I had studied English literature as an undergraduate, I was not familiar with contemporary poetry. I'm not sure, now, that my classmates knew more about poetry than I did, but at the time I was aware of their sense of ease. The way my classmates spoke, the cadence and grammatical structure of their speech, demonstrated this. The same way their bodies took up space in a room, they took their time when speaking, as if they felt they deserved to be listened to. I, on the other hand, rarely spoke, and when I did, I was overcome with tremendous shame.

When during my two years in the program I was told repeatedly by my classmates and my professors that my poems made no sense, I felt ashamed and assumed, automatically, that they were right. As a result, I deleted large portions of my writing. It took me decades to recognize that the very things I was erasing in my writing were class-based, which is to say that what my classmates and teachers were unable to comprehend was my worldview. When I am told to make my work more "clear," what I am actually being told is to make my writing adhere to a certain cultural aesthetic, which is formed and determined by middle-class writers and editors. Indeed, there are very few contemporary poets or fiction writers from the American working class, and those few who are tend either to incorporate culturally shared stereotypes and caricatures about the working class in their writing,

or they abandon their working-class background entirely. In both cases assimilating into the literary elite is the pay off.

What I did not know, what I could not have known, was that what I was leaving behind was not just the place that formed me, but also an integral piece of who I am. When I left my hometown, I left behind not just the people who mirrored incompetence and their lack of faith onto me, not just my hometown and my connections to my working-class background — when I left my home, I also abandoned myself.

What, then, remains of the working-class artist who leaves her working-class origins in order to become someone? Nothing, nothing but a shell, a kind of armor she constructs. Once she finds herself away from her home, inside the middle-class world, she takes on the vernacular, the body language, the values and desires of the society she finds herself in.

Afraid for his life, witnessing the deaths of many of his friends, James Baldwin fled the US aged twenty-four. In an interview with *The Black Scholar*, Baldwin described how he was very poor and he “slept in the streets and under bridges.” And yet, leaving the US was necessary for him, not only for his literal survival but also in order that he could have the space to negotiate his self away from “home,” the ability to see who he had been and what he had become. In an interview with Studs Terkel, he said:

I finally realized that one of the reasons that I couldn't finish the novel was that I was ashamed of where I came from and where I had been [...] when I say I was trying to dig back to the way I myself must have spoken when I was little, I realized I had acquired so many affectations, had told myself so many lies, that I really had buried myself beneath a whole fantastic image which wasn't mine.⁵

Barbara Loden's film *Wanda* depicts the life of a working-class American woman who abandons her life, including her children and husband, in a desperate attempt to escape a future of poverty. “An atmospheric,

melancholic character study,” is how the film scholar Maya Montañez Smukler describes *Wanda* in her book *Liberating Hollywood: Women Directors and the Feminist Reform of 1970s American Cinema*.⁶ Although she tried for ten years after the release of the film, *Wanda* was the only film Loden was able to make, due to lack of finances and social connections. It is the story of a working-class woman living in an American mining town, in poverty, who attempts, by attaching herself to various nomadic men, to escape her fate. The film was based loosely on her own experience. As Loden explained in an interview on the *Mike Douglas Show*, “She’s trying to get out of this very ugly type of existence, but she doesn’t have the equipment.”⁷

Loden was born in Asheville, North Carolina. Her father was a barber and she described herself as a “hillbilly’s daughter.” When her parents divorced Loden was raised by her religiously devout grandparents in Appalachia in rural Marion, North Carolina. Described as “shy, humble, a soft-spoken loner,” Loden left North Carolina at the age of sixteen for New York where she worked as a pin-up model and a dancer at the Copacabana nightclub, eventually studying at the Actors Studio with the intention of becoming an actress. “A lot of people look down on this kind of girl and think she’s stupid,” Loden said, “Anybody who thinks this girl is stupid has no heart.”⁸ For the working-class woman, her body is her only source of income. Either she can use her body for physical labor (eg, factory work, waitressing, or working as a maid or nanny) or she can use her body as a form of sex (eg, prostitution, modeling, dancing, or marrying up in class).

Loden’s roles were usually restricted to those based on her appearance, and she acted in a string of such performances. In 1964 she portrayed Maggie, a fictionalized version of Marilyn Monroe in her future husband Elia Kazan’s Lincoln Center Repertory Company stage production of *After the Fall*, written by Monroe’s former husband Arthur Miller. Loden received a Tony Award for her portrayal and was described by reviewers as

the “new Jean Harlow” and a “blonde bombshell.” Though Loden expressed empathy for women who were forced to play such roles, she detested having been confined to these stereotypical portrayals of women. In interviews she often spoke about how being reduced to roles based on her physical appearance negatively affected her sense of self-worth. In 1971 in a conversation with McCandlish Phillips for the *New York Times*, she said, “I didn’t think anything of myself. So I succumbed to the whole role. I never knew who I was, or what I was supposed to do.”⁹

In 1966 Loden married Elia Kazan, twenty-three years her senior. That same year a mutual friend, Harry Schuster, offered Loden \$100,000 to make her own film. Unable to find a director interested in directing (including her husband), Loden directed it herself. Unable to procure additional funding, *Wanda* includes only two actors, one being Loden herself. This lack of funding informed all of her choices in the making of the film. As Bill Conlogue writes in *Here and There: Reading Pennsylvania’s Working Landscapes*, due to a lack of money, Loden filmed *Wanda* using a 16mm handheld camera, worked with a skeletal crew of one camera man, one sound man and one assistant, and rather than film in Appalachia, the region Loden grew up in, *Wanda* was filmed in Forest City, Carbondale, and Scranton.

It took Loden seven years to begin filming *Wanda* due to a lack of finances and a lack of social connections, as well as a lack of confidence. This lack of confidence is the result of a lifetime of being told, explicitly and implicitly, that one is dumb and unimportant. Over the years, these encounters accumulate and take hold, resulting in the internalization of these critical voices, culminating in a debilitating lack of self-esteem. The shame that results from this internalization is then seen by those from outside the working class as evidence of poor character. For example, *Wanda*’s shyness in the film is labeled by critics as a sign of “passivity” and is thus condemned by feminist critics and writers. As Kate Taylor writes,

“Like her character, who is rejected by society, Ms Loden ultimately found most doors in the film business closed to her.”^{[10](#)}

Wanda takes place in an industrial working-class setting: a coal-mining town in Pennsylvania. It is the story of a working-class woman who is poor, without work and without opportunities. After losing custody of her children, she follows a string of men in an attempt to escape her fate and find an alternative future for herself. When the film was released in 1970 it was subject to derision from critics. For example, the American film critic and writer for the *New Yorker*, Pauline Kael, wrote:

We’ve all known dumb girls, and we’ve all known unhappy girls; the same girls are not often, I think, both dumb and unhappy ... She’s an attractive girl but such a sad, ignorant slut that there’s nowhere for her and the picture to go but down, and since, as writer-director, Miss Loden never departs from the misery of the two stunted characters, there are no contrasts. The movie is very touching, but its truths — Wanda’s small voice, her helplessness — are too minor and muted for a full-length film.^{[11](#)}

One would imagine contemporary writers and critics would have a better understanding of the plight of the working class and, therefore, of Barbara Loden’s film. Sadly, this is not the case. In Nathalie Léger’s *Suite for Barbara Loden*, she claims to try to “find” Loden and yet is unable to. She writes that she consulted dictionaries and biographies and “gathered information” about *cinéma vérité*, artistic avant-garde movements, the New York theater scene, and Polish immigration to the United States. She researched coal mining and, she says, she researched hair curlers and “the rise of the pin-up model after the war.”^{[12](#)}

Léger looks to the surface, hair curlers and pin-up models, for clues to understand *Wanda* and, in turn, Loden. Although social class is everywhere in the film — from the opening scene where the poverty of her life is made concrete by the ruinous state of her sister’s home, to Wanda’s inability to

find employment, and her getting robbed while sleeping in a movie theater because she has no place else to go — Léger is somehow unable to see social class in the film.

Loden's social class doesn't exist because the working class is symbolically dead; because we are told that there are no social classes. Or, rather, class does exist, but only for the middle class, which is the only class represented in the media. As a result of this deliberate erasure, *Wanda* appears enigmatic, incomprehensible. At the same time, due to the erasure of her class, Wanda and Loden (because for non-working-class female writers the two are one and the same) becomes a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate onto which middle-class writers project themselves.

Léger sees herself in Wanda. Herself, that is, but an enigmatic, indecipherable version of herself. A woman stripped of voice and context, emptied out. A screen upon which Léger can project herself. Attempting to articulate the lives of working-class subjects while at the same time removing their class is a form of violence. In the end, Léger concludes that *Wanda* is a film about a “commonplace story”¹³:

Her own story, enmeshed in this one, is probably no more than the ordinary story of a lonely, unloved child, a child who has been silenced, forced to submit to someone stronger than they are; the kind of sadness that it is not easy to get over — a commonplace story.¹⁴

When writing about *Wanda*, Léger uses Loden's first name, dismissing all pretense of respect. Though she refers to the inclusion of poverty in the film, Léger insists the film is “nothing illustrative of any social drama.”¹⁵ With this statement, she suggests that poverty is unbound to the social: as if poverty is not the result of society, but instead is the result of one's personal failures. Having erased class from the film, she assesses the film with its central concept removed from it. When Léger claims that Wanda's story is

“commonplace,” she is comparing Wanda’s plight with the experience of middle-class women.

Rather than attempting to understand Loden or Wanda through Loden’s own words and film, her experience as a working-class woman, Léger looks to herself to try to find the key. One such example occurs when Léger states that “Wanda never cries,”¹⁶ and rather than making a serious attempt at discerning why this is, she then goes on to describe her own crying: “Sometimes when I am alone I find myself howling silently in front of the mirror as if I wanted to verify a hypothesis.”¹⁷

Furthermore, the answer to why Wanda cries so little despite the fact that she is suffering is explained quite clearly by Loden herself. One such example is included in Bérénice Reynaud’s beautiful essay “For Wanda”:

She had said: “I have a lot of pain and suppressed anger in me, just like Wanda,” and explained the apparent “apathy” of her character as a way to conceal an inner hidden turmoil (which she significantly describes as a physical symptom).¹⁸

Here, Loden has made herself clear, explicit in her articulation of her learned passivity, and yet, although there are a number of such instances where Loden explains quite clearly Wanda’s behaviors and the underlying societal reasons for them, Léger doesn’t appear to have found such interviews useful. Rather than looking to Loden for answers to her questions about her, Léger concludes, instead, that it is impossible to understand her, “We will never know the source of the wound that condemns Wanda to this loneliness.”¹⁹

Excising class context from the working-class subject will, unsurprisingly, render her inscrutable. Social class, like gender and race, inform every aspect of our lives. In this passage, and in the passages cited above, Léger’s language is poetic, devoid of the precision inherent in the language of inquiry. Here, for example, she repeats the refrain, “We will

never know.” Indeed, *Suite for Barbara Loden* is marketed as a work of fiction, and the branding of the text as such allows for this looseness of facts. At the same time, it untethers the writer from the bind of responsibility. She can play with facts, create her own reality, without being held accountable. What, though, are the ethical implications of appropriating the lives of the oppressed in one’s artwork for one’s own valorization?

Assuming that Loden has the same access to social, cultural, and material capital as them, non-working-class women writers and critics can’t understand why Wanda appears passive, why she makes the choices she makes. The inability to see Loden is only possible if one does not see social class, which is only possible in a culture where class informs every aspect of our lives, through an extreme act of will. To not see Loden and her life — the choices she was forced to make due to her social class — is, indeed, a symptom of social class. Repeatedly in interviews Loden addressed this issue of class, the very topic of *Wanda*, as Kate McCourt writes in her essay “Who Was Barbara Loden?: *Wanda* and the Life of an Actual Woman”:

In interviews, Loden claimed her main character doesn’t know “what she wants — but she knows what she doesn’t want” and described Wanda as having “been numbed by her experiences... she protects herself by behaving passively and wandering through life hiding her emotions’.”^{[20](#)}

What seems to confound and anger female critics and writers is why Loden doesn’t make Wanda an aspirational character, a heroine. Of course, what is missing in this assessment is the fact that working-class women don’t have the same privileges as middle-class women. Furthermore, not all working-class women (or men, for that matter) want what the middle class wants. Indeed, when we do it is often not actually our own values or desires but rather the middle class’s values and desires that we have unknowingly internalized.

Similar to Léger, in *The Flamethrowers*, Rachel Kushner includes Loden's film as a kind of fetish, on the final page of her seven-page portfolio of influences at the back of the book, titled "A Portfolio Curated by Rachel Kushner." The list includes the Autonomia movement, a movement of people she describes as working-class and sub-working-class "who came together for various reasons at various times to engage in illegality and play,"²¹ and New York City of 1977, which she describes as "a period that has long fascinated me, when the city had a Detroit-like feel, was drained of money and its manufacturing base, and piled up with garbage."²² Like these oblique references to the working class, Kushner's reference to Loden is similarly vague, bled of specificity. Of *Wanda*, she writes: "Barbara Loden's *Wanda*, about a young woman who isn't afraid to throw her life away."²³

Why Kushner would make this proclamation is bewildering, and yet this dismissal is precisely the problem Loden's project is getting at: society's erasure of the working class. Kate McCourt notes this fetishizing of the working class:

It's an interesting juxtaposition that in Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces*, the life that Loden was fortunate to escape — and that *Wanda* attempts to get away from in the film — is exactly the lifestyle Jack Nicholson's character has run to as an escape from his upper-class background.²⁴

Like the aristocratic film student, Julie, in Joanna Hogg's film *The Souvenir*, who fetishizes the working-class and who I discuss in a later chapter, Kushner's list of influences, a hodgepodge of tropes emptied of meaning, serve to give the writing an edge, a sense of daring. At the same time, the actual subject of the fetishized references, social class, is razored out. When, for example, Kushner describes Manhattan during the 1970s, she conveniently omits social class altogether. Eagerly describing the city as being "drained of money" and "piled up with garbage," she doesn't mention

why the city was “drained of money” (it had been taken over by the banks), who fled the city (the middle class), or who was left to stay (the poor and the working class). And she doesn’t say anything about how the austerity imposed affected those still living in the city, due to which nearly a quarter of workers lost their jobs.^{[25](#)}

Kushner’s claim that *Wanda* is a film about a woman *throwing her life away* suggests that Wanda’s decision to leave a life in poverty was somehow impulsive. It also suggests a judgement: to claim that Wanda threw her life away is to claim that Wanda made a poor moral choice (as opposed to stating that Wanda, for example, fled a life of poverty). About having left her hometown, Loden told the French film critic Michel Ciment in an interview, “If I had stayed there, I would have gotten a job at Woolworth’s, I would’ve gotten married at seventeen and had some children, and would have got drunk every Friday and Saturday night. Fortunately, I escaped.”^{[26](#)}

In the end, though, the film itself is all we really need to understand Wanda. Indeed, this is why Loden made it: to illustrate the experience of Wanda, a working-class woman trying to make her way in a world, within a system constructed and run by those in opposition to the working class. As Bill Conlogue writes,

Wanda depicts a working-class woman’s struggle to survive on her own. In conceiving the film, Loden was “influenced by certain literature... Dostoevsky and Zola — about the problems of the poor working class and the horrible lives that people led.”^{[27](#)}

In an interview with the Tate, the artist and filmmaker John Akomfrah, describing his commitment to the dialectic of montage, the importance of history, and his reliance on the documentary, explains an encounter where he overheard someone speaking of migrants as cockroaches. This experience prompts Akomfrah to ask, “How do people migrate from being

human to being cockroaches? What do you have to forget, what is the process of amnesia that allows the kinds of forgetting that build into hierarchies in which there are beings and non-beings?"²⁸ He responds to this question by answering, "The question of why history matters is connected to the question of why non-fiction matters because you can tell [...] when a surplus of fiction got into the mix."²⁹ Akomfrah's concept of fiction here is akin to contemporary female writers who use Barbara Loden's life as an element of fiction in their fictionalized non-fiction. Barbara Loden becomes the subject of their artwork, available for revisioning to whatever ends suit their artistic needs. Furthermore, this "surplus of fiction" blurs the line between reality and fiction, leading to phantasms where the working class exist outside their social class, without context, filled with the aura of what previously defined them (their social class). Considered exotic, enigmatic, strange, like a fetish object in the work of non-working-class artists and writers, glowing but without meaning.

To have choice is a luxury. The lives of the working class are defined by a lack of choice. Wanda's choice was either to stay in her hometown and live a life of poverty or use her body as a form of labor in an attempt to escape her fate. Of Wanda, Loden said, "She's trapped and she will never, ever get out of it and there are millions like her."³⁰ When asked in the same interview with McCandlish Phillips whether she had a solution to the problem she set out to depict, Loden responded, "No, just to change the whole society."³¹ Also in the same interview, she explained: "People are always saying, 'Why don't they work within the system?' They don't because the system doesn't work, you see."³²

Feminist critics and writers seeking to find in Loden a heroine they can relate to and latch themselves onto will be confounded at the prospect of a woman from the working class who refuses to assimilate. In essence, a woman who has nothing and yet, despite this, has no desire to trade in this

nothingness for the middle-class feminist ideal of freedom. As Kate McCourt writes:

Loden made no attempt to alleviate the depressed atmosphere of *Wanda*, or to paint a more “likeable” picture, and described her characters and their environment by saying, “My subject matter is of people who are not too verbal and not aware of their condition... they don’t have time for wittily observing the things around them.”³³

Indeed, Loden’s *Wanda* is revolutionary, a work of art attempting to show how the working class live. When asked whether the Hollywood film *Bonnie and Clyde* had been an influence on her, in an interview with *Film Journal* in 1971, Loden responded that *Bonnie and Clyde* was “unrealistic... it glamorized the characters... People like that would never get into those situations or lead that kind of life — they were too beautiful... *Wanda* is anti-*Bonnie and Clyde*.”³⁴ Loden was interested in depicting the nuances of working-class existence in the United States. *Wanda* is not an aspirational story, a feel-good tale on behalf of neoliberalism. As Amy Taubin writes in “*Wanda: A Miracle*,” “Loden’s investment in documentary truth — which is not the same as realism — was part of her desire to show a world that she knew, without homogenizing it.”³⁵

For the characters in *Wanda*, robbing a bank is not a symbolic gesture, or a form of protest. It is an act of survival. Furthermore, Loden disliked the slickness of Hollywood, “I really hate slick pictures, they’re too perfect to be believable,” she said, adding, “The slicker the technique is, the slicker the content becomes, until everything turns to Formica, including the people.”³⁶

Slickness implies seamless assimilation and conformism to the culture. It also suggests that the artist has herself become slick; that she has forsaken who she was for a shiny, alternative version of herself. Loden’s insistence

on the authentic is demonstrated by a number of factors. For example, there are only two actors in the film, and it was shot on a grainy 16mm, usually reserved for documentaries. Loden expressed her interest in the experimental films of Warhol, citing his work as an influence. The warp of the film's slow pace, the graininess of the film, and the deliberate incoherence of the characters' speech all serve as evidence of this. Indeed, as Taubin writes, "Here was an American depiction of outlaws that refused to glamorize (think of *Wanda* as Loden's retort to *Bonnie and Clyde* and to Faye Dunaway's *Bonnie* as a fashion icon)." ³⁷

Loden was vocal about her dislike of the slickness of the film industry, and society in general, which she believed needed overhauling. In her interviews and throughout *Wanda* this is transparent. For example, in a scene in the film, Mr Denis, a man Wanda attaches herself to and with whom she plans to rob a bank, says, "If you don't want anything, you won't have anything, and if you don't have anything, you're nothing. You may as well be dead. You're not even a citizen of the United States." To which Wanda responds, "I guess I'm dead, then."

This negation — of capitalism, and of the entire system (as opposed to cheerleading for incremental acts of progress) — was not, and I would add, is still not, what middle-class feminists recognize as part of their struggle. As Taubin writes:

At the moment in the early 1970s, the feminist movement was split over whether its political imperative was to secure the liberty of all women or, more practically, to throw its weight behind the talented, the ambitious, the already privileged. There was — and continues to be — discomfort around *Wanda* because the central character is not a role model. ³⁸

Describing a scene in the film where Wanda appears in the distance, standing against the background of coal, Bill Conlogue writes: "Dressed in light-colored clothing, which stands out against the gray background,

Wanda is at once lost in this landscape, a part of it, and separate from it. The stripped place points to the stripped lives lived there.”³⁹ Here, Conlogue deftly illuminates a cinematic choice that makes intuitive sense to viewers like myself who come from the working class: that of being so overwhelmed within a system, affected by it in innumerable ways, and yet being unable to recognize or articulate what is happening. This scene is similar to the opening of John Akomfrah’s film *Handsworth Songs*, filmed during the London and Handsworth riots and constructed of archival film footage, photographs, and a series of overlapping voices providing witness testimony. In the opening scene, a clip from Philip Donnellan’s *The Colony*, a documentary about working-class immigrants from the Caribbean, Victor Williams, a bus driver, is shown below an overwhelming network of machinery, gazing in awe up into its endless intricacy, illustrating the overwhelming aspect of the invisible and incomprehensible structures at work and the insignificance of the man lost inside it. Similarly, Wanda is shown from a distance, a tiny speck among the mining machinery.

Describing Wanda’s seeming passivity, Conlogue writes,

Loden, who understood Wanda as an expression of herself, explains that “everything has been knocked out of Wanda. She has been numbed by her experiences, and she protects herself by behaving passively and wandering through life hiding her emotions. This apathy is her defense, her way of surviving.”⁴⁰

Through the process of making *Wanda*, Barbara Loden found herself. That she had to find out who she was suggests that she lost who she was. And she did. Who she was was formed in the place where she came from: her working-class origins. And yet, in order to “become” someone (an actor and director), she had to discard where she came from and the characteristics of herself that were connected to this place. By making *Wanda*, Loden was able to articulate her way back home.

Contrary to the widely held belief that at the end of the film Wanda is lost, it is, in fact, at the film's end that she finds herself in the same way Loden was able to locate herself through the making of the film. Conlogue describes the final scene with beautiful precision. In his words, the roadhouse at the film's end is a "shelter of community," one in which people care for one another, "Men and women feed Wanda a hot dog, offer her cigarettes, and pour her beer. No one tries to pick her up. The film closes with a freeze-frame of her that suggests the terror of self-realization..."⁴¹ In this scene, a space outside both worlds — of middle-class homogeneity and her fate of poverty — a non-place, a realm within worlds, or deaths, is where Wanda finally meets herself.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MELANCHOLIA OF CLASS

Depression is, after all and above all, a theory about the world.

— Mark Fisher

I was trained to be ashamed of my working-class origins, and as a result, over the years, I slowly shed my connections to my background both in my life and in my writing. In other words, I became lost. I didn't know who I was, I only knew that I wasn't middle-class. At the same time, I knew I would no longer ever be able to fit back into the place I came from. I had changed. But into what?

Because all aspects of culture and society reflect the middle class, we begin, at an early age, to unconsciously internalize and assimilate into the values and desires of the middle class. At the same time, because the concept of social class has been removed from discourse, there is no reference point to motion to what is being lost in this process. What was being lost if there is no such thing as social class? What was I becoming if there are no social classes? By the time, years later, that I arrived in New York, I had become something else, but what?

I felt alienated and depressed. I went to therapy, I bought self-help books, I tried yoga, and even, for a short period of time, antidepressants. The therapist gave me Prozac, then when that wasn't enough to curb the sorrow, she added more, and when that wasn't enough, she added Wellbutrin. Nothing helped. These overwhelming feelings of alienation and melancholia are, for me, not connected to a specific event. Rather, they mark the space between the world I now live in, an overwhelmingly middle-class one, and the working-class world I grew up in. What I lost,

haunts, because, as it was happening (as my working-class origins were being lost), I did not experience it.

In his seminal essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud compares the two concepts. “Mourning,” he writes, “is commonly the reaction to the loss of a beloved person or an abstraction taking the place of the person, such as fatherland, freedom, an ideal and so on.”¹ For some, though, melancholia takes the place of mourning. Melancholia, Freud explains, “is mentally characterized by a profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of the ability to love, the inhibition of any kind of performance and a reduction in the sense of self, expressed in self-recrimination and self-directed insults, intensifying into the delusory expectation of punishment.”² In both melancholia and mourning, then, the sufferer grieves the loss of a loved object.

The symptoms associated with mourning are the result of the mourner’s internal, psychic labor of releasing her attachment to the lost loved object in the process of grieving; once this mourning is complete, the mourner is freed from her binding to this lost loved object. In mourning, the sufferer necessarily faces the hard reality that what or whom she has loved is now gone, no longer exists, and she must now place her energy entirely upon the object that has been lost. This is the work of mourning: turning away from one’s life and engaging in the labor of working through this loss. Such work entails attending to each memory and expectation connected to the lost loved object. This, in turn, necessitates the slow detachment of these memories and expectations from the sufferer’s libido. Such work takes time and an enormous amount of energy. But once this has been accomplished, the work of mourning will indeed be complete.

Whereas with mourning the sufferer is able to work through her grieving because she is aware of what she has lost, with melancholia, as Freud explains, what or who has been lost is unclear:

it is difficult to see what has been lost, so we may rather assume that the patient cannot consciously grasp what he has lost. Indeed, this might also be the case when the loss that is the cause of the melancholia is known to the subject, when he knows *who* it is, but not *what* it is about that person that he has lost.³

Mourning results in the same traits as melancholia aside from one: the reduction of the sense of self, which occurs only with melancholia. As Freud writes, “In mourning, the world has become poor and empty, in melancholia it is the ego that has become so.”⁴ This loss of self-esteem is the result of the ego aligning itself with the lost loved object; the melancholic’s incorporating their feelings of rejection, as a result of this loss, onto themselves. The melancholic’s laments (*Klagen*), as Freud writes, are actually accusations (*Anklagen*) against the lost loved object. Describing this movement of the melancholic’s ego, Freud writes that, unlike with mourning, where the libido is withdrawn from the lost object and is displaced onto another object, with melancholia the libido is drawn back into the ego. There, the libido identifies with the abandoned object and, as Freud writes, “In this way the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, which could now be condemned by a particular agency as an object, as the abandoned object.”⁵ As the Lacanian psychoanalyst Darian Leader writes, “In mourning, we grieve the dead; in melancholia, we die with them.”⁶

In addition, in contrast to mourning, in which the sufferer is able to move through her grief due to a sense of clarity around her loss, with melancholia the lost object represents both a loved object and a hated one. This ambivalence, then, blocks the grieving process. These mixed feelings result in guilt, leaving us in a complex bind. I understand that I had to leave my home in order to escape the limited opportunities available to me, and yet my very attendance at private liberal arts colleges and graduate school, my relocation to the East Coast, and my profession have changed me into

something else (neither working-class nor middle-class). There is, of course, also my sadness at having left.

On top of all this is the shame I have internalized over the years, the voices of teachers and classmates, colleagues and students, who make it clear to me, on a regular basis, that I do not belong in the world in which I now find myself. While teaching undergraduate students, I am often interrupted by a student informing me that I am not pronouncing a word “correctly,” and when teaching graduate level students, I am also often interrupted and again “corrected,” especially when teaching texts by working-class artists. These corrections, akin to my being told I could not get a PhD, attend college, and so on, are reactions to my very existence (as a member of the working-class) inside the middle-class world. In other words, these explicit and implicit acts are attempts at gatekeeping. And yet, not knowing these reactions were connected not to me personally but to my social class, I internalized them, which resulted in self-loathing. As Leader explains, “We’ll have difficulties in mourning not because we loved someone too much, as common sense might suggest, but because our hatred was so powerful.”² For most of my adult life I had ambivalent feelings towards where I came from and my working-class background. As I have already explained, I was unaware of my class, and therefore unaware what it was about myself and my upbringing that I abhorred. Instead, I attributed the negative mirroring I received from others to my being inferior. That the characteristics others saw as flaws in need of improving were class-based did not occur to me until just a few years ago when I found myself, once again, in yet another academic setting, being told that what I was saying was wrong.

While I was a PhD student studying for a degree in German Language and Literature, during class my professor offhandedly stated that “there are no classes in the US.” In response, I raised my hand and explained that I come from a working-class family, and that, in fact, the majority of

Americans are working-class, if not working poor, struggling to live paycheck to paycheck. I didn't know what else to say or precisely what question it was I was asking. When these occurrences happen, I lose my breath, I lose myself. It is a kind of shock, a form of trauma. Without skipping a beat, the professor responded, in front of the class, by stating that I was wrong, and without further comment, moved on. This incident illuminates the way that class is erased (by my professor saying there are no classes), while, at the same time, the very structure of class is enacted in all instances of our lives. In this case, an Ivy League-educated professor marginalized me, a member of the working class.

This was not dissimilar to previous experiences I had as an undergraduate and graduate student. Though I have become accustomed to being told my ideas are wrong, each time it occurs I am shocked once again. My life is marked with such experiences. They occur with such frequency, and more often than not, in a casual, nonchalant manner. Indeed, the way class is deployed, invisibly and with ease, is in itself indicative of the way class functions, where members of the upper classes' sense of ease and effortlessness is perhaps one of the most powerful forms of capital. As Bourdieu writes in *Distinction*:

Ease is so universally approved only because it represents the most visible assertion of freedom from the constraints which dominate ordinary people, the most indisputable affirmation of capital as the capacity to satisfy the demands of biological nature or of the authority which entitles one to ignore them.⁸

My emotional reaction, my lack of ease in such instances only serves to further cement my place in the class hierarchy.

This sense of self-loathing, this all-consuming sense of shame, is how I feel most of the time. I was not born this way. Indeed, I remained blissfully unaware of class and my place within its hierarchies until it was

interpolated onto me. Over the years, each time I experienced these instances of interpolation, I became more and more withdrawn into myself, feeling more and more ashamed of who I was. As the years passed, I unconsciously began to assimilate into the culture I was surrounded by, a predominantly white, upper middle-class, liberal culture, without knowing I was doing this. Everything I was surrounded by, indeed, everything I am surrounded by today, is informed by neoliberalism, a set of beliefs so integrated into our culture, we are unaware it exists. Neoliberalism's message, infiltrated as it is into every crevice of society and culture, states vehemently that we are all born with the same privileges, that we all have the same advantages, and that those who do not succeed have only their own ineptitude and/or laziness to blame. What I lost as a result of my assimilation, what I was losing, was unclear because what I was losing did not, according to neoliberal culture and society, exist.

Freud's description of the melancholic's ambivalence toward her lost loved object describes my own experience with my working-class origins. Because I was made to feel shame about my class background, I came to despise it. And yet, at the same time, I love where I come from — both my class origins and the place where I grew up. I grew up in Northern California and, for the most part, lived among nature. Animals were a major part of my childhood. I grew up with dogs and came face to face with hawks and snakes and rabbits on a daily basis. This communion with nature was, and remains, an integral part of my life. Furthermore, both my brother and my uncle are car mechanics, and my father worked with cars, buying and selling them when I was little. And I have long attributed my compulsion to make work to these early memories.

I am grateful for my childhood, which taught me how to make do with very little. This is a trait the musician Mark Linkous attributes to country people: the creativity that results from having few things and having to find ways to make these few objects do the work you need. During one scene in

the documentary *Sparklehorse=Mark Linkous=Southern Man*, Linkous explains how he is working on a recording of his playing a guitar, backwards, which he then “scratches on,” to create a recording he will then use as an instrument when performing live. In the film, he explains: “The way country people kind of, being so isolated, they have to kind of improvise with things they have access to. I always thought that was a really admirable trait of country people.”⁹

Such work, done by hand, is reliant entirely on invention. In such a world, everything is revered: nothing is wasted. One learns to make art from what one is given, from what one has on hand. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu describes this practice as integral to the working class:

An old cabinetmaker’s world view, the way he manages his budget, his time or his body, his use of language and choice of clothing are fully present in his ethic of scrupulous, impeccable craftsmanship and in the aesthetic of work for work’s sake which leads him to measure the beauty of his products by the care and patience that have gone into them.¹⁰

This desire for good quality, for work that is made by hand, is something I learned as a child. To make do with little, with what we have, and to make something from nothing. And perhaps, most importantly, the value of quality.

For years my father wore the same black leather cowboy boots that lasted for years. This is to say that rather than buy a number of pairs of fashionable shoes, throwaway fashion in other words, my father preferred instead to purchase one pair of sturdy boots, perhaps the equivalent in price of two or three fashionable or trendy shoes, despite the fact that we didn’t have much money. This philosophy was also evident when my mother and father saved their money and sent one or two or all of us children to live with our grandparents in Germany for summers, despite not having much money. The trade-off, having less in other areas of our lives, was worth it: I

spent many of my summers in Europe. These summers outside of the United States taught me that there were other ways to live, other belief and value systems, outside the small one I was living in.

When I left my hometown to make “something” of myself, I left behind my formative love object, my working-class background. In order to grieve this loss, it would have been necessary for me to recognize it. But because the topic of class has been removed from discourse in the United States, because Americans have been taught to believe that there are no class distinctions, when I abandoned my working-class origins, what I lost remained invisible to me. Furthermore, the fact that the concept of class has been removed from discourse means not only that we, the working class, do not exist (if there are no social classes, there is no working class), it also means that any discussion we might attempt to make about our existence as members of the working class is also removed. When I began to understand that my melancholia was related to the loss of my working-class origins, I had no language with which to speak of this loss.

But of course, not all artists have to leave their hometown to become “someone.” And yet, because the contemporary art, music, and literary worlds consist primarily of the middle class, even if an artist is from the same city or town, the transition into the art world will most likely necessitate a move away from their working-class origins. As a result, the artist will find themselves in a predominantly middle-class world. When we leave our home, we lose our loved object. And yet, when we leave our working-class origins, we find ourselves in a world where, as a result of neoliberalism, the notion of class doesn’t exist. A world where the very thing that has been lost is symbolically dead.

Since the advent of neoliberalism in the 1970s and the totality of its ideology, the term “class,” and, more specifically “working class,” has been removed from social discourse. Like all hegemonic ideologies, neoliberalism appears as though it does not appear, and yet its ideology

informs every aspect of our lives. For example, neoliberalism's ideology that we are born equal, each of us with the same access to capital — monetary, cultural, and social — and that if we fail we have only ourselves to blame, has been so fully integrated into society it is taken as an indisputable fact. Thus neoliberalism, by its very nature, precludes the concept of social class. It is common, for instance, for the middle class to insist they never see members of the working class, as if their nannies, their children's teachers, police, and postal workers, do not exist.

And yet, despite its disappearance from discourse, the working class is, at the same time, vilified. One example of this is Hillary Clinton referring to the working class as “a basket of deplorables” during her 2016 presidential campaign. Of course, her comment was directed at supporters of President Trump and yet, it is a conflation of the working class and Trump supporters. This has turned out to be a toxic myth, one I have heard repeated by liberals who prefer to blame the working class for Trump's election rather than imagine that there may be Trump voters among the middle class, for example liberal capitalists who believe in less government regulation and less taxes, which means less public programming for the working class and the poor. Furthermore, beneath this disgust for the working class is a palpable fear. For the middle class, the working class is a monstrosity. A looming mass that, though it cannot be seen, haunts all aspects of society and must be kept back from the threshold.

The middle class's insistence that the working class does not exist while at the same time vilifying them is a strange paradox. Perhaps we can better understand this phenomenon by looking at Freud's short essay “Verneining”¹¹ (translated as “disavowal”). In it, Freud recounts an analysand's announcing, upon arrival to his session, that the figure who appeared in his dream was “not my mother.” This “not,” Freud explains, is akin to an origin stamp, a “Made in Germany” stamp, as he suggests, marking the analysand's mother. Like a blanket wrapped around the object

being disavowed, this “not” allows the analysand to bring the disavowed subject of his mother to his consciousness.

When the middle class insists that “there is no working class” it is similarly a case of an object (the working class) being too large for the conscious (of the middle class) to absorb. Introducing the disavowed object with the “not” affixed to it allows the middle class to bring the working class to the surface, though this does not mean that the object is accepted. As Freud writes, “Negation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed; indeed it is already a lifting of the repression, though not, of course, an acceptance of what is repressed.”¹² And yet, as Freud explains further, “The outcome of this is a kind of intellectual acceptance of the repressed, while at the same time what is essential to the repression persists.”¹³ When this occurs, like the analysand’s mother, the working class keeps appearing in the dreams of the middle class.

Furthermore, in Freud’s essay, the analysand’s suggestion of his mother is preliminary. Without being asked, the analysand insists the figure in his dream is “not” his mother. It is as if the analysand is presenting the negation of his mother upon entrance to analysis as a means to banish the idea of his mother from discourse. A child who says, without his mother’s asking, “I did not eat those missing cookies,” similarly attempts to negate the subject from discourse. The oddness of this behavior is striking: if the analysand had not brought up the subject of his mother, the subject of his mother would not be dragged into analysis with him. But this is precisely how psychoanalysis works, which is to say: this is precisely how the unconscious works. The defensiveness of the analysand is what is surprising in this regard. This strange defensiveness parallels the vehemence with which the middle class insists there is *no* working class.

Existing within the margins, the fissures, the ruptures — the working class haunts contemporary culture, a specter. When, here, I speak of the specter of the working class, I am motioning toward the subsuming of the

working class beneath neoliberalism: banished from discourse, but not disappeared. This is made evident by the middle class's insistence that the working class does not exist but also by other manifestations, such as the fetishism of the working class by the middle class.

In Joanna Hogg's film *The Souvenir*, for example, the film's aristocratic protagonist, Julie, is dead set on making a feature film about the working-class community of Sunderland, despite her having no experience with the town. Further, although she comes from old money, Julie adorns herself in expensive designer interpretations of working-class attire. And yet, when she enters into a romantic relationship with Anthony, a man from the working class, from Sunderland, she is unable to see that he is working-class, or that "class" even exists. Indeed, her fetishizing of the working class serves as a form of disavowal; it takes the place of the disavowed belief. Freud tells us that fetishism allows us to not see the gaping hole behind the fetish, the thing the fetish obscures. In this case, what the fetishism of the working class obscures is class struggle, and in doing so the middle class does not have to look at their role in it and their direct responsibility for the suffering of others. In Julie's case, it is class struggle — and her place within it — that allows her to purchase expensive meals from Harrods and to attend film school.

Of course, people from the working class may very well also wish to purchase meals and items from Harrods or other upscale department stores. Indeed, the desire for goods is a complex issue. Once an object is made available for purchase it becomes a fetish object. As if imbued with an aura, the commodity radiates meaning. Marx writes that the commodity, at first glance, appears a "triviality," whereas after analysis it turns out to be "a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."¹⁴ He is referring to its fetishistic qualities: the aura or magic that appears around or within it, that mystical quality that lures the consumer to it. The fetishistic quality of the commodity — this mysterious element

within or surrounding it — obscures the human labor necessary for the object's coming into being.

This was true during Marx's time and has become ever more so, as advertising companies have become more astute at sublimating meaning into commodities. Marx's original concept of the fetish object refers to the aura of an object, which is the result of the individual worker's communion with that work of art. This unspoken secret is what gives the commodity its illumination, making it irresistible to the consumer. But, as Benjamin writes in *The Arcades Project*, it is the worker who wanders through the arcades or the shops and department stores in an attempt to distract ourselves from the everyday brutality of capitalism. And though allowing one's self to become enamored with these objects that are the direct result of fellow workers, whose sales will only profit the owners of companies, the capitalists, these objects remain mystery-filled, like stars simmering in far-off galaxies. To own this magic feels, in the moment, like the solution. Knowing intellectually that purchasing unnecessary objects with money we don't have is self-destructive is often not enough to stop us from doing so. This may be even more true for the working class and poor who, because we have nothing, are more susceptible to the mysticism of the commodity object. Infused in this complex operation is the death drive: though we know spending our last two hundred dollars on a jar of perfume or a pair of beautiful shoes will only bring a day's worth, at most, of exuberance and will be followed by suffering, the need for escape from the brutality of the world can become so overwhelming that the choice to indulge, which is to say the choice to escape into a phantasm, becomes too overwhelming to say no to.

When I was twenty and homeless, I was living in what was at the time called a "junkie hotel," a decrepit hotel where drug addicts, alcoholics, prostitutes, poor families, and the homeless lived. Itinerant, no one, or very few of us, lived there. We paid by the day, week, or month. The rooms were

basic, like motel rooms, and there was a payphone down the hall. One month I had somehow managed to gather the money for my month's rent, which was due. And yet I was obsessed with a pale blue crêpe dress in the window of one of the shops in town. I had, of course, no occasion to wear such a dress. I had no friends, was part of no social circle. I was homeless. And yet, I couldn't resist. It was irrational, non-sensible, and yet, with nothing to lose, with no hope for my future, purchasing the dress seemed to me like paying for a ticket for entry into another realm, another, parallel world. Again, none of this was conscious — I knew only that I had to have that dress.

Like using alcohol or drugs or smoking, spending money I don't have on something that will only bring a day's worth of escape makes no logical sense. And yet, often it is the only means of escape, even if only temporarily, from the world's endless onslaught. And these actions — spending money when I don't have it, drinking or using drugs, smoking — are forms of the death drive, which is to say, an unconscious desire to burn everything down to nothing so we can begin again. And, I should add, such actions, with their inherent risks, serve also as temporary escape from the zombie-like death of melancholia.

The desire for commodities is also, at the same time, ingrained in us from a very early age. By the time we become aware of these wishes, it is often no longer clear whether such desires originate within us, or outside in the culture and are internalized. And in the same way the fetishistic quality of the commodity obscures the act of its coming into being — through the labor of the working class — the concept of money obscures the concept of social class. Neoliberalism insists that if we work hard enough, we can earn as much money as anyone else. Of course, the concept of meritocracy is integral to neoliberalism and erases the reality of capital itself, that capitalism is not just material capital but also, importantly, social and cultural capital. Without these three forms of capital, one cannot, in fact,

“succeed” in a capitalist culture. One obvious example is the art world, where one can only have their work shown in a gallery if they have connections to that gallery (galleries do not, for the most part, accept unsolicited submissions). All the cash in the world can’t create the generations of social connections of a middle-class family, whose circle might include art collectors, gallerists, critics, and artists. It is also the values and unspoken rules of the ruling class that distinguish who is allowed in and who is not.

So my critique of Julie frequenting Harrods is not simply aimed at her regular visits to the upscale department store. Rather, it is her blindness to the fact that others are not able to access such worlds with such ease and that her ability to do so is built on the backs of the working class. In other words, it is Anthony’s very existence, as a member of the working class, that allows Julie’s family and, by extension Julie, to live her life of privilege. Social class is in excess, it flows over: though Julie refuses to see social class, and though the subject is never explicitly referred to in the film, it spills over into every aspect of her life.

This overflowing results in a haunting, recalling Marx’s declaration that “a spectre is haunting Europe.” Marx’s pronouncement, referring to communism, might, in this case, be adapted to the specter of the working class. The specter haunts because the working class is still alive. In *Looking Awry*, Žižek asks, “Why do the dead return?”¹⁵ “The answer, he writes, “offered by Lacan is the same as that found in popular culture: *because they were not properly buried.*” He writes, “The return of the dead is a sign of a disturbance in the symbolic rite, in the process of symbolization; the dead return as collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt.”¹⁶

A disavowed force, invisible to the middle class, banished from discourse and yet existing, like a ghost, at the margins of society, the specter of the working class awaits its reemergence. Unbearable to the middle class, the working class is nonetheless lifted into its consciousness through the act

of *Verneinung*. And, like Freud's analysand who insists he did *not* dream of his mother, the more the middle class asserts that there is *no* working class, the more the working class appears. A repeating thought that will not go away, the working class appears like a mother in the dreamworld of society, a haunting specter.

The stamp "there is no" affixed to the term "working class" also affirms it through negation (as opposed to *Verneinung*). As Paolo Virno explains in *An Essay on Negation: For a Linguistic Anthropology*, "I do not negate what is black by indicating what is white. I negate it if and only if I say 'not black.'" [1718](#) He goes on to explain how this phenomenon works:

The "not" is added to a predicate phrase ("is kind", "has gone to Rome", "loves me") that continues to express in all its consistency the state of affairs or fact of which we speak. The state of affairs or fact are in any case designated, and thus *preserved* as meanings, at the same time as they are verbally *suppressed* ("is not kind", "has not gone to Rome", "does not love me").[19](#)

Here, similar to Freud's *Verneinung*, the act of negation, while it suppresses, at the same time *preserves* meaning. The middle class insists there is "no" working class, as if by this insistence the working class might be annihilated. And yet, the negation of the term "working class" suggests precisely the opposite. Indeed, this "not" impregnates the term "working class" with life. It preserves and therefore affirms the notion of the working class. The more the middle class asserts that there is *not* a working class, the more the working class appears. And reappears, like a repeating thought. And like all repeating thoughts, it reminds us that, though the conscious might repress the truth, in the end the truth will always come out.

Though the concepts of social class and the working class have been removed from discourse, social class and the working class have not. Ghost-like, a haunting, roaming Antigone-like figure. Existing between

worlds, lamenting from this cut, like Antigone, the working class haunts. Though (symbolically) dead, we cannot be put to rest because we are still alive.

Antigone's demand is that her brother be given a proper burial rite. She will not back down until her demand is met. Her insistence is a form of no, an act of symbolic suicide. A burial rite is a symbolic act. By pronouncing the dead *dead*, they are laid to rest. When the dead are not given a proper burial, they exist between worlds, undead. Because the working class has experienced a symbolic death, they, too, are in need of a symbolic burial rite. The metaphoric burial rite, in this case, would be societies' acceptance and pronouncement that social classes *do* exist and that the working class *does* exist. By doing so, the working class would be returned to the symbolic.

Because the ruling class will not do this, the working class exists as a form of the death drive, a blind energy that moves beyond the symbolic. Driving the working-class body ever forward in its attempt to return to its origin while, at the same time, driving itself toward death. The aim of the death drive is to return to its origin, to destroy everything in order to begin again. The death drive in its symbolic suicide allows for an emptying-out, making space for the possibility of something new. The death drive, "whose function it is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death,"²⁰ through this circular repetitive movement, this endless band, moves forward as it moves back into the past. Always moving, gaining momentum, in an endless circular loop.

The death drive is an intrinsic pressure to repeat an earlier condition. This repetition compulsion provides the passive victim of trauma a means of agency over an event they once felt powerless over. With each repetition, the subject experiences pleasure at the act of repetition but at the same time displeasure at having to experience the original trauma — though sublimated — again. The act is inherently paradoxical because the drive is

engaged in a forward momentum while, at the same time, its aim is always to return to its origins. As Freud explains, “Those instincts [drives] are therefore bound to give a deceptive appearance of being forces tending towards change and progress, whilst in fact, they are merely seeking to reach an ancient goal by paths alike old and new.”²¹

For the working class, who have experienced a symbolic death, there is no place of origin; it has been symbolically killed. Filled with melancholia for our lost loved object, driven by unconscious forces into a repetitive, circular movement, the working class is “beyond,” as in beyond all hope. Like Antigone, who is also beyond all hope, the working class has nothing — to lose. And with nothing to lose, the working class are in the right place. The place where we can see, as Lacan says in his *Seminar on Ethics*,

from Antigone’s point of view life can only be approached, can only be lived or thought about, from the place of that limit where her life is already lost, where she is already on the other side. But from that place she can see it and live it in the form of something already lost.²²

It is only when we experience the loss of an object that it becomes evident to us, as Freud illustrates in his writing on *Fort-Da*, a game his grandson created. By throwing a ball while saying “*fort*” (gone), then retrieving it while saying “*da*” (there), the boy was able to symbolize his mother’s leaving and returning, helping him to gain mastery over something he had no control over. And it is through this symbolization (of his loss) that the object *becomes*; as Alain Vanier writes, “it is at the moment of its loss that the object appears as such.”²³ And through the death drive, through this repetitive, self-destructive, circular movement, the working class is able to experience a sense of mastery over their symbolic death while, at the same time, re-experiencing the lost loved object, albeit in its sublimated form.

In his *Seminar on Ethics*, Lacan defines *Trieb* as both *drive* and *drift*. He writes,

The *Trieb* must be translated insofar as possible with some ambiguity, and I like sometimes to say *dérive* in French, “drift.” It is in any case “drive” that is used in English to translate the German word. That drift, where the whole action of the pleasure principle is motivated, directs us toward the mythic point that has been articulated in terms of an object relation.²⁴

Indeed, the word *Trieb* translates into both *drift* and *drive*; words that overlap into one another. For example, the word *drift* is defined as “a being driven,” and *drive* is defined as “to compel or urge to move, impel in some direction or manner; to hunt (deer), pursue; to rush against.” Lacan’s introduction of the term *drift* as a derivation of *Trieb* suggests an additional meaning for the drive in relation to the working class. The word *drift* calls to mind the nomadic, the peripatetic, the wanderer, the itinerate. In Laura Grace Ford’s project, *Savage Messiah*, for instance:

I pass by the industrial estates, the Furniture world on Orient way and fall into some Wetherspoons called the Drum. I’m over the other side now, a different zone echoing provincial English towns in the early ’90s. Acid hangovers float around, garish graffiti drug references in luminous yellow and day glo tangerine. We feel the place drift around us. BAD E in spraypaint over a bookmaker’s door, girls trapped in a post goth/pre rave sartorial dilemma. This isn’t London and yet it couldn’t be anywhere else. As I’m smoking my second cigarette it strikes me that I could hide out here in this place of forgetting. It would let me lie embedded within it.²⁵

Or perhaps what is called for is a *driven drift*, or a *drift propelled by drive*. Having lost their working-class roots, the working class has no home and has been removed from discourse.

The working class are symbolically dead. And, like the living dead, the working class are also neither dead nor truly alive. Like Antigone, they exist between deaths, and between worlds, as a form of pure death drive.

Lacan describes the drive as fluid, as chaotic, as grafting onto anything that it comes across. In his *Seminar on Ethics*, he says, “But our point of departure is the relationship of the libido to that *Netz*, that *Flüssigkeit*, that *Verschiebbarkeit* of the signs as such.”²⁶ *Netz*, here means “networks,” *Flüssigkeit* means “liquid,” and *Verschiebbarkeit*, “movability.” The *drive*, then, can be understood as liquid, a kind of black, gelatinous, mass.

Let us return now to the *drift*. Barbara Loden’s film *Wanda* is an example of the *drift/drive*. Wanda’s behaviors are seen as evidence of her stupidity by feminist critics. She is like Anita G. in Alexander Kluge’s brilliant film *Abschied von Gestern*, who similarly has been rendered symbolically dead (as a Jewish woman in post-WWII Germany) and finds herself without any possibility for survival aside from aligning herself with strange men. In Kluge’s film, Anita G. ends up without food or money, turning herself in, to be cared for by a state institution (a women’s prison). In one scene she is shown running in a series of circles, and towards the end of the film she is shown again walking in a series of repetitive circles, while within the circle of traffic rotary. She is trapped within the endless circuitry of the death drive, a relentless force driving her back to her origins (her home in East Germany with her family and her Jewish identity), while at the same time driving her toward death (where she can wipe the slate clean and begin again).

In Barbara Loden’s film, Wanda similarly ends up in a circuit. We watch her leaving her life behind: her husband, her family, and children. In an attempt to escape her fate she latches onto a series of strange men. In the penultimate scene, where she is to meet her boyfriend at a bank they have planned to rob, she arrives late. Realizing she has escaped what would have surely been a “second death,” she is returned to a landscape similar to that of the opening scene. She has come full circle. And in this circle of the death drive, she has burned everything down in order for something entirely new to appear.

CHAPTER FOUR

BETWEEN TWO DEATHS

I was like the living dead. I lived like a zombie for a long time.

— Barbara Loden

By the time I realized I would never be accepted into the world, which is to say the middle-class world, it was already too late. By then, who I was, was gone. I knew I wasn't middle-class, but I also could no longer go back home. I'd become something else, but what?

Sometime around 2015 I began to reconsider my poetics. I had been trained to make crystalline poems. My aim was to make the perfect line, the perfect stanza; to construct a poem with absolute precision. When I looked back at my writing, I felt shame about my early work, work littered with the detritus of the world. Not the middle-class world, but the everyday world I experienced — the quotidian aspects of my own life (trying to make ends meet) and my experiences living in a city where more and more the working class and poor were being made obsolete or homeless. And yet when I read these poems, they seemed juvenile, elementary. But when I began to realize that the world I was attempting to depict — one that was grounded in the everyday experiences of the poor and working class, what I was experiencing and what I was seeing; a world at once complex and contradictory — was not only not perfect, it also became clear that a perfect poem, with its perfect line and construction, could not be deployed to relay what it was I was attempting to portray.

When I read my first two books, I felt shame not only because the poems were saturated with the detritus of the lives of American struggling — beer cans, drug use, car lots, food brands, bus stations, psychiatric

wards, waiting rooms — but also due to the proximity of the work. Whilst contemporary literature may boast of being more intimate in terms of subject matter — the memoir, or memoir-packaged-as-novel, are bestsellers — the distance deployed in the voice and the form is not. This distance protects the writer, a kind of folded form of disavowal, which is usually also further sealed against self-disclosure through a formal disavowal at the end of the book. For example, a memoir that describes one's teenage years where one used drugs or alcohol but is now happily recovered, or memoirs sold as auto-fiction where the author utilizes the private lives of the working class, poor, or otherwise exotic and cast-off as a foil for disclosing their own possibly risky personal antidotes or belief. This distance, and the middle-class values that go along with it, are folded into contemporary literature and art.

In “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin contrasts the “remembered” and “memory,” explaining that what is remembered is protected, while memory disintegrates. Furthermore, the type of writing he describes as one that can carry one's community and its history, “*textum*,” weaves these two types of memory together. Looking back at my own work, I see that this is precisely what I was doing, though I was unaware of it at the time. Though on the surface such writing, writing from the lyrical “I,” may seem self-centered, self-indulgent, it is the only way to lift one's community and its history out of obscurity and silence and into discourse. Writing with distance, writing “perfect” poems (poems constructed entirely of remembered memory), are unable to do such work.

These realizations about my own writing occurred around the same time I began to realize that I would never be accepted into the middle-class world I found myself in. I knew the way I'd been taught to write, the way I was writing, was no longer sufficient. At the same time, with each encounter where my “wrongness” was interpolated onto me, I began to see that my wrongness had in actuality nothing to do with me, and everything

to do with my working-class background. These realizations forced me to reconsider my life and question who I was and what I had become.

After decades of trying to become “someone,” of working as hard as I could — publishing six collections of poems and a collection of essays, teaching at a handful of colleges while continuing to educate myself, first a BA, then an MFA, then another MFA, an MA, and then a PhD to propel myself out of the death of my past and a fate of poverty and destitution — I found myself trapped between two worlds. The middle-class world I found myself in but which would not accept me, and the world of my working-class origins, a world in which I no longer belonged, having left decades ago. And between two deaths: an imminent death — were I to have remained home — and the death I found myself within now, a living death. I belonged to neither world and could gain entry to neither world. At the same time, I no longer knew who I was. In my flight from my working-class origins, I had lost who I was, and yet what I had become was nothing but a ghost of who I had been. I was a zombie, undead, a ghost, trapped between deaths — like Anthony in *The Souvenir*.

The Souvenir opens with a wound: black-and-white archival footage of Sunderland, the working-class shipping and mining city on the northeastern coast of England. Though the origins of Anthony, the male protagonist, are never explicitly referred to (his father states that he worked in a shipyard as a child and Anthony’s mother is from Newcastle), Sunderland serves as a stand-in throughout the film for Anthony and his lost origins. It tells the story of Julie, a privileged young film student living in her family’s apartment in the upscale Knightsbridge neighborhood of London, and her developing relationship with Anthony, an older Foreign Office worker with a nebulous background. The 2019 film is a semi-autobiographical project by filmmaker Joanna Hogg, with the character of Julie as Hogg’s stand-in, played by Honor Swinton-Byrne, the daughter of actress Tilda Swinton, who appears as her mother. Julie comes from old money, doesn’t have a job,

and dines regularly at the luxury department store Harrods while she attends film school. Swinton comes from aristocracy. This is no secret — her lineage is listed on her Wikipedia page. That she plays the aristocratic mother and that her real-life daughter plays her daughter in the film is an act of genius, and directs the viewer to read the film as a *roman á clef*.

Julie's privilege, though never spoken of outright, is referred to symbolically. For example, in a scene where the two are in her bed, Anthony playfully tells Julie she's taking up too much space, complaining that she has an extra foot while he has none. "I wasn't trying to cross any kind of threshold," she says, to which he replies, "You've got a foot on that side, and I literally am on a ledge. I've got nowhere left to go. You've got a foot. I've got nothing." Though the context is space in their shared bed (her bed, as he has nowhere to live), the class undertones are quite apparent: she was born into privilege and thus will always be a foot ahead of him. In sharp contrast, Anthony has nowhere to go both literally (he is essentially homeless) and metaphorically (he is working-class but trapped in the world of the upper class).

Anthony is aware of Julie's class, but Julie remains oblivious of any social class other than her own. Describing her project for film school, a film about the working-class city of Sunderland, she explains, "My character, Tony, is being forced to be raised to come to terms with incredible struggles his family is going through... being forced to come to terms with something so harsh for someone so young." The vague terms Julie uses to describe Tony reveals the fact that she not only has no experience with this type of suffering, but also that she has spent no time or effort learning about the lives of the people she wishes to portray. This ignorance is glaringly obvious, and parallels her relationship with Anthony, with whom she spends a lot of time but who she knows nothing about. She also shows no interest in learning about him. Early in the film, in one of a number of scenes where Julie is questioned by her teachers regarding why

she wishes to make a film about such a radically different experience from her own, she replies:

I want to not live my whole life in this very privileged part of the world I come from, [...] and I want to be really aware about what's going on around me with people, and community and politically, as well [...] I don't want to be in that bubble my whole life.

Like the Vivienne Westwood boots she wears that cost hundreds of pounds but look as if they are a thrift store discovery, Julie seems to believe that by simply making a film about the working class (without researching the actual lives of the people being depicted) she might be allowed a reprieve from her privilege. This assumption is a dangerous one for a number of reasons. First and foremost because she believes she is making a sacrifice and that, furthermore, she is actually experiencing a world unlike her own.

The film never explicitly shows Anthony's connection with the place that formed him, just as we never truly see Anthony. The viewer meets Anthony only after the erasure of his origins. Though his reasons for doing this are never remarked upon, it is clear why he has done what he has: it is only by cutting away his working-class origins that Anthony can have a life of privilege. In Julie's existence, the life he desires is reflected back to him. Hogg's use of mirrors and frequent reliance on split scenes underscores this reflection. We never see Anthony removing himself from his origins. What we are privy to instead are the blurred edges of a man in the final stages of self-erasure. What we see is the finished product of this act. With his tailored suits, his accent, and his cultural currency (his affiliations with elite institutions and knowledge of culture), Anthony passes as not-working-class. But what exactly he is passing as is less clear. That Anthony remains an enigma to those around him is in large part due to his being working-class but surrounded by those who are not. Those around him don't see themselves in him. Unaccustomed to seeing the working class, aside from

as anonymous workers (maids, butlers, drivers, clerks, and wait staff), they can't see Anthony, and so he remains mysterious.

The brief opening of the film, a series of black-and-white archival images of Sunderland, are all we have of Anthony's background. This, and another brief glimpse during a later scene when Julie is looking through archival images for her film. This world is also alluded to through the film's soundtrack which, aside from the opera Anthony listens to, consists primarily of British and US working-class bands such as Bronski Beat, Madness, Joe Jackson, and the Fall. This music, though, is what Julie and her friends listen to, not Anthony, who listens to opera. Twice in the film, Elvis Costello's song "Shipbuilding" (covered in the film by the British musician Robert Wyatt) appears. It tells the story of the sons of the working class sent to fight in the Falklands War while, at the same time, shipbuilding communities became more prosperous due to the sinking of ships during that war and the need to build new ones. The knotty contradiction in the song — the possibility of earning more money at the cost of the loss of young lives and the idea of leaving your working-class community only to fight in a war and perhaps never return — is folded into the film.

Never contextualized, the inherent meanings to this song, the origins of the other working-class bands and songs included in the film, and the fact that Julie and her friends prefer this music to the elevated and elite music Anthony listens to, are also never explained. Elliptical in nature, the film's scenes often appear hazy, as if beneath a sheath. In addition, the scenes are stacked back-to-back, separated by the shock of sharp cuts that both punctuate each scene and, in their violence, leave huge swaths out. This construction mimics memory — the way memories are recorded in our minds as small distinct scenes, without connectors between them. At the same time, the huge swaths of experience cut out of the film allude to the blacking-out of memory inherent in trauma. In this case, the trauma of

Anthony having cut his own working-class origins from his history and, presumably, from the film of his own memory.

After this opening footage, *The Souvenir* cuts to a party in Julie's apartment, where she first meets Anthony. The introduction is one-sided: although he's introduced, we don't see him in the frame. We hear only a young woman's voice saying to Julie, "This is Anthony, my lodger." The introduction of Anthony as a "lodger" defines his working-class standing to both Julie and to the viewer (though he is, or claims he is, a diplomat and was schooled at a private, elite college). As the party scene continues, the camera shows only the back of Anthony's head as he is speaking, not his face. He remains anonymous, invisible, which is to say he is of the working class, just one of the many. How Hogg introduces Anthony stands in stark contrast to the way she introduces Julie and her friends. Though she is merely a student, Julie is described repeatedly as a "film student" or a "filmmaker." With Julie and her friends, the camera is intimate, hovering near their faces and bodies. It is as if we are present with them, laughing and drinking beer on Julie's soft couch. In this way we become complicit in the upper-class gaze of the film. Following these opening two scenes, the next scene occurs at Harrods. Here, we see Anthony from a side profile, again obscured. In this scene he and Julie are discussing film. Though in the scene Anthony is speaking about film in general, what he is saying about film is at the same time a commentary on the film he is in, as well:

We don't know the inner machinations of their minds or their hearts. But that's what we want to know when we go see a film. We don't want to see life played out as it is. We want to see life as it is experienced, within this soft machine.

What he is saying stands in sharp contrast to a later scene in which he questions the importance of authenticity and sincerity. Such contradictions occur throughout the film, and when they do, they create a threshold which

the character is pushed up against. No longer working-class, Anthony is also not *not-working-class*, which is to say that he does not belong to any other social class. He exists nowhere, in a liminal space between.

Along with not belonging to any social class, he also belongs neither to the world of the living or the world of the dead. Throughout the film, Anthony appears ephemerally — he appears and disappears, has no past, no known life outside of the shared space with Julie. Except, of course, for his forays into the underworld. Though never contextualized, never directly referred to, we understand that Anthony's vanishings are related to his heroin addiction, itself a form of delving into death. As the film progresses, Anthony's addiction worsens. Indeed, his use of heroin can be understood as a form of the death drive — a means to propel himself out of the Möbius strip within which he is trapped, the static between worlds. It is through his use of heroin — this tiny simulacrum of death — that he might be able to gain traction and locate an exit which, in the end, he does: death as the portal out. At the same time, his addiction is doing quite simply what the death drive is intended to do: reducing internal tension due to external stimuli (in this case: social and class anxiety, financial worries, and the overwhelming melancholia of class) so that he can survive.¹

In the scene in which Anthony is arguing for film that moves beyond superficial representation, insisting on something more authentic, something that registers nearer to the inner worlds of the characters and their lived experiences, Julie's film about Sunderland is precisely what he is arguing against: one in which the inhabitants of a town, of a class, are portrayed not through their own individual and complex lives, but rather as mere tropes, stereotypes. Julie's only face-to-face interaction with people from the working class come from media representations and from her interactions with her family's hired help, who remain outside the frame of the film. Media representations of the working class do appear in the film:

Julie and her friends listen, for instance, to music from the working class. A hipster, she wears clothes that approximate the style of the working class.

And yet, Anthony argues for much of the opposite in a later scene when he questions Julie's desire to appear "authentic." Where the two concepts meet: authenticity versus a flat, superficial, representation and Anthony's own attempts at passing for what he is not, is the space where he cannot go. To touch this place, this wound between, would mean annihilation. Who would he be if he were to venture toward authenticity? This is the same space that occurs between the repeated mirror reflections and other such doublings in the film (split scenes resulting from two rooms filmed side-by-side, elevator scenes where the two are separated and yet mirrored). What is the space where the two might actually meet? Not superficially: not Julie's fetishizing of working-class music and clothing, Sunderland, and her imagined rehabilitation of the working class, not her slumming. In the film, neither Julie nor Anthony's inner workings are shown. Instead, what we see are their masks, their masquerading-as.

Unlike Freud's *Verneinung* and his analysand and the disavowed mother figure who appears in his dream who is *not* his mother, in *The Souvenir* there is no overt mention of social class. And yet the entire film is saturated in it: Julie's clothing and posh apartment, her aristocratic background, her ability to attend film school, and her regular meals at Harrods. The film is crammed with social class and yet, because it's never articulated, in much the same way that disavowal works to bring the subject to the surface: it looms large, spilling from outside of the film's frame. Like a Greek chorus, all conversation about class and privilege occurs outside the confines of Julie and Anthony's interactions. And most of these instances are during Julie's parties. For instance, in one scene, a young Black man shows off a cashmere scarf he has bought at Harrods: "I got it from Harrods," he says, "Where the classy and people with decorum and class go." Due to the loud music playing, his friends reply, "Harolds"? "I get a bit of dough, move up

in the world, and everyone's dissing my clothes and my clobber," he replies. These outside scenes, external to Anthony and Julie's interactions, provide the necessary context for their conversations, which have been bleached of class references.

In addition to these party scenes, Julie's interactions with her film school teachers also provide contextualization. Over and over her professors bring up class. They ask why she is so intent on writing not about her own lived experiences but others', they comment on her privilege (noting that someone who lives in Knightsbridge probably isn't concerned about finances), and consistently question her fetishization of the working class.

In another scene, when Anthony asks Julie, "Are they [the characters in her film] more real than we?", she replies, "Everyone is equally real." And yet when Anthony presses Julie on this statement, pointing out how her characters are her own creations, she changes course. "It doesn't matter that they're not real people," she says, "I'm not making a documentary."

The "souvenir" of the film is most obviously Jean-Honoré Fragonard's 1778 painting of the same name; a painting Anthony takes Julie to see hanging in London's Wallace Collection. The canvas portrays a young woman carving the initials of her lover into a tree. In the painting, on the ground near her feet, is a letter from her lover. Anthony sends similar letters to Julie, small bundles of paper that appear mysteriously in her mail slot. In the film, though, what is discarded and forgotten are Anthony's working-class origins: the people, places, and objects that have formed him. In the place of what he has abandoned is an unfathomable abyss, a wound. In Fragonard's painting, the girl carves a wound into the tree in an act of remembrance. But Anthony has done the opposite: he has fled his past, attempting to hide all evidence of it. And yet, as the film unfolds, it becomes clear his wound will never heal. Instead, it will rot, and eventually subsume him.

The word “wound” is never used explicitly in the film, but both Anthony and Julie do say “the vile beast.” In a letter Anthony writes to Julie, he observes, “The vile beast knows itself. And miserable he is with it. It is you who has power over the beast.” What is this vile beast? A lazy reading would extrapolate the “beast” as his working-class origins, the feral creature within him causing endless turmoil. Instead, the “vile beast” might be read as the submersion of his origins and the resultant wound. Illness also looms large in the film. Anthony is obviously ill: with melancholia, the result of turning away from his origins. This damage, the “vile beast,” manifests in his ghostliness, his lack of dimension and, of course, his heroin use. The illness, the monster that overshadows Anthony’s life, is the truth of his origins, a truth he can neither fathom nor swallow. Strangely, in the film, this illness is a contagion, a virus that infects not only Anthony but also Julie, who comes down with a mysterious illness.

In a sense, then, Anthony is the wound. He has digested himself, his origins, who he was and what formed him, so that in the end, all that is left is a gaping laceration. When he ransacks Julie’s apartment to pay for their trip to Venice (which he cannot afford), he tells her the apartment has been robbed. As she reacts to this, he leaves the room, tells her he is calling the police, and then slams the phone receiver in anguish. When Julie runs to him, he shows her his “wound,” the abrasion he has caused himself by slamming down the phone (and not calling the police). His physical wound speaks on his behalf; it takes the place of language.

One often questions whether Anthony is cognizant of what he is saying. His language diminishment appears to be the result not of drug use but rather of having become a mere shell of who he once was. After their return from Venice, when the two are sitting face-to-face in Julie’s apartment, she confronts him regarding his theft from her apartment, and he replies, “I appreciate there are things about me that you find unacceptable. There are things about you I find unacceptable.” He continues, “I do what I do so you

can have the life you're having. Sleep safe at night." There is an obvious leap here, between his first and second sentences. The first is a hazy response to her clear accusation. But the second, though ostensibly referring to his work with the Foreign Office, also speaks to his existence as a working-class person. The working class and poor must exist in order for families like Julie's to enjoy their privileges. It is unclear whether Anthony is aware of the implications of what he is suggesting: his unconscious is speaking through him.

And it is this, the unconscious and the wound as unconscious, that in the end will speak. After he disappears without explanation, Julie eventually meets Anthony one last time for a meal at Harrods. She behaves as she always does — coy, flirtatious. But he appears desperate, telling her he has met with someone to speak of finances, of "frugality." He has come up against a threshold: he can either face the truth of his class background and live accordingly, with all the restrictions this entails, or he can continue his masquerade. To this Julie responds with a question, "Investments?" There appears to be a space between Anthony's words and Julie's, as though content has been omitted from the film. "Frugality" and "investments" are leagues apart. One suggests necessity, the other choice. Julie is unaware of the limitations Anthony is alluding to due to her class privilege. But rather than ask, she behaves as she always does, asserting her own world, the only world she can see, upon his. Following this, Julie tells him, "I always use the wrong fork on purpose," in yet another reference to choice and privilege. Anthony responds, "Both of mine are the same size." A mirror image of the scene earlier in the film where Anthony complains about having no space in the bed, this scene alludes to how Anthony's choices are limited in a way in which Julie's are not. He begins sobbing at the table, the first and only instance of the manifestation of his true self. In response, Julie sits quietly across from him. Her silence demonstrates her inability to

understand or have empathy for the struggles of those from outside her class.

In a scene where Julie is working on a statement for her film, she tells Anthony she wants to be sincere in her presentation. In response, Anthony says, “We can all be sincere, we can all be authentic, but what’s it all for?” As he does throughout the film, Anthony functions on two levels. He questions Julie’s intense desire to be genuine, while also speaking to the larger existential quandary of authenticity and class. Julie can choose to be more or less sincere, but for Anthony sincerity and authenticity would mean embracing his working-class origins and no longer attempting to pass as affluent. He would need to return to the social and economic confines of a working-class existence.

Later in the film, when Julie is talking about her film, she explains her protagonist, “Tony,” to Anthony. This doubling, as Julie explains Anthony’s life to him, speaks to her hierarchy in social class and power, and the inherent power in her ability to name the world, which is to say to graft meaning onto his life. By doing so, Julie inhabits the power of authority. Her unawareness of this power is evidence of her class hierarchy. As Bourdieu notes, the sense of ease that animates the privileged makes its presence felt through such acts of naming and organizing the world with nonchalance and ease.

Tony, Julie explains to Anthony, is a sixteen-year-old who has lived in Sunderland his entire life. He is insecure and shy, and has a constant fear of his mother dying. Implied in the mother’s death is a sense of decay or ruin. When Anthony asks, she tells him that she first learned of Sunderland through “an installation by some artists I knew,” alluding to questions of cultural appropriation and authorship. “Then you got interested in the rot?” he asks, to which she replies, “Yes.” This “rot” is connected to the wound, Anthony’s repression of his working-class origins, which nonetheless “rots” through.

Julie is not interested in making a documentary, even though, as Anthony's father, who comes from a shipping community, explains to her, Sunderland could use one. A documentary could protect the city, which lost both its mining and shipping industries during the 1980s, when the film takes place. Instead, Julie is interested in constructing her own version of the city and its people. When Anthony asks her, "You're not trying to document some received idea of... life up there, on the docks, the daily grind... huddled listening to the wireless?", speaking to the opening archival footage of Sunderland in which these images along with the sound of a wireless radio appear, Julie responds, "Well, I am, but I'm creating something new with it. The material is real. These people exist, but I'm designing new ones to fit what I want to make."

Julie's response parallels a comment Anthony makes later in the film, when Julie insists he is "on something" because she recognizes he is not "himself." Anthony responds: "I know you have a received version of who I am supposed to be at any one time." Implicit in this paralleling is the idea that not only does Julie have a preconceived concept of Sunderland and, by extension, how the working class exist, she also has a preconceived idea of who Anthony is.

For one, he is not a drug addict because, as she explains, she knows him, and when she believes he is "on something" she insists he is not "himself." Furthermore, in another scene, when she returns to her apartment to find a man, who, we are to assume, is a friend of Anthony's, and, presumably, in a tank-top and tattoos, better fits Julie's conceived notion of what a "junkie" looks like, she appears visibly startled, telling the stranger repeatedly to leave. This scene stands in stark contrast to Julie's reading of Anthony. Or, perhaps, I should say "mis-reading." When, for instance, in an early scene, she sees a wound in his arm, the result of his heroin use, she does not recognize the wound for what it is. Instead, she tells him to leave it to heal without inquiring about its origins. In other words: she recognizes

the strange man in her apartment, in tank-top and tattoos, as a “junkie,” but when she sees clear evidence of Anthony’s heroin use, she does not recognize it as such because it does not match her preconceived idea of what a “junkie” is, nor of what or who Anthony “is.”

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva defines the “abject” as the visceral fear of annihilation that occurs when confronted with someone or something that is, as she writes,

Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A “something” that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me.²

The result, then, is a need to protect one’s self from this figure of the abject.

In the film Julie contracts a mysterious illness connected to Anthony (the doctor tells Julie what she has caught is transmittable by others) and his wound. Here Anthony’s wound becomes symbolic for the reaction of others to his working-class origins. Inherent in Kristeva’s definition of the abject is a sense of contagion and a lack of boundaries.

Julie can use objects and references of the working class just as long as they are mediated by someone or something from her privileged class. Examples include her introduction to Sunderland, a working-class town, introduced to her via an art installation in London, music made by working-class bands, and fashion that appears to replicate the clothing of the working class made by top fashion designers. This meditation buffers the sense of abjection — by providing a boundary that separates her from the unknown thing she is frightened of. Similarly, her interactions with Anthony, also a product of the working class, are tempered by his own class hatred and his abandonment of his class background, and of himself.

At the end of the film, the wound absorbs Anthony, destroying and devouring him. He dies alone in a public restroom of a heroin overdose, outside the frame of the film. We only learn he has died when Julie’s

mother receives a phone call in the middle of the night, then comes down the stairs and tells Julie of his death by saying, “The worst.” Anthony’s death, like his past and, indeed, his very existence, is oblique — a negation, an allusion. The facts of his death, like the facts of his origins, of his life, are represented as sordid, dirty, beyond comprehension, and, as such, they occur outside the film’s vernacular. Furthermore, his death, like his life, is mediated through those outside of his social class. In this case, by Julie’s mother. Anthony is visible and palatable by the middle class only when he is mediated through ambassadors of their own class. Without this interaction, Anthony disappears into the ether, a specter.

CHAPTER FIVE

BETWEEN TWO DEATHS II: THE LIBIDINAL WORKING-CLASS BODY

*The ghost of a steam train, echoes down my track
It's at the moment bound for nowhere
Just going round and round*
— The Jam, “Town Called Malice”

*It's getting faster, moving faster now, it's getting out of hand
On the tenth floor, down the backstairs, into a no man's land
Lights are flashing, cars are crashing, getting frequent now
I've got the spirit, lose the feeling, let it out somehow*
— Joy Division, “Disorder”

In order to become “someone,” one must assimilate. But to assimilate is to kill off part of who we are. As Mark Fisher writes, “Assimilation is sometimes the most effective kind of assassination.”¹ For many years, when I taught, I was aware that I couldn't teach as I was, a working-class writer, that I had to somehow appear to be something else. And yet this something else was an indeterminate someone else, vaguely middle-class, someone with a sense of natural ease and entitlement. To attempt to teach without trying to simulate these traits, would mean that I would be annihilated. And yet, I do not have these traits. They are class-bound, characteristics intrinsic to the middle class. What I end up doing instead is attempting to perform them. When I am teaching, I am neither who I am (working-class), nor am I who I am attempting to pass as (middle-class). How do I teach, then, as a ghost? How do I exist?

You see this performative aspect in Anthony in *The Souvenir*, who, though working-class, attempts to pass as non-working-class. But everything about his presentation — from the clothing he wears, his accent, his mannerisms — are the result of having studied and made the decision to attempt to pass as not working-class. When the working class attempt to pass as non-working class, we become neither a member of the class we are attempting to pass as, nor are we any longer a member of the working class. Neither one nor the other, our true selves are subsumed under. As a result, we become nothing — a ghost trapped in a liminal limbo. We become a form of living dead, caught between deaths.

In his essay “No Longer the Pleasures: Joy Division,” from *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, Mark Fisher argues that Joy Division, and its frontman Ian Curtis, are libido-less. “No heat in Joy Division’s loins,” he writes, explaining:

Beyond Pop’s bipolar oscillation between evanescent thrill and frustrated hedonism, beyond Jagger’s Miltonian Mephistopheleanism, beyond Iggy’s negated carny, beyond Roxy’s lounge lizard reptilian melancholy, beyond the pleasure principle altogether, Joy Division were the most Schopenhauerian of rock groups, so much so that they barely belonged to rock at all. Since they had so thoroughly stripped out rock’s libidinal motor — it would be better to say that they were, libidinally as well as sonically, anti-rock.²

Though it’s clear that Joy Division, and Ian Curtis in particular, can’t be said to be of the same libidinal ilk as the Rolling Stones, Iggy Pop, or Roxy Music, with their overt sexuality, to say that they are without libido isn’t quite right, either. I would argue that Joy Division and Curtis are, indeed, a libidinal band.

“Libido” is the term Freud uses for all human energy. This energy, then, is not the final product, but rather something that clings to an object.

Toward, for instance, what we desire. Indistinguishable from the death drive, it gains momentum and velocity in its circuitous drive after the object of its desire. As Lacan writes, “libidinal demand exists, the demand for a certain dose, of a certain level of direct satisfaction, without which harm results, serious disturbances occur.”³ It is fluid, endless movement, a liquid-like substance. It is energy that can be directed away, for instance, from the world, and then sublimated into artwork. This energy can also be directed back into the body, away from the world, when the world disappoints. As Freud writes:

Another technique for fending off suffering is the employment of the displacements of libido which our mental apparatus permits of and through which its function gains so much in flexibility. The task here is that of shifting the instinctual aims in such a way that they cannot come up against frustration from the external world.⁴

This is the force that animates and drives Curtis’s being, his body, his music, and his hyper-kinetic dancing. In the same essay, Fisher describes Curtis’s dancing as “disturbing-compelling hyper-charged stage trance spasms.”⁵ Elsewhere, in an essay on Michael Jackson, he writes: “Dancing is always about the death drive, about the libidinal disciplining of the body, about forcing the body into unnatural postures and shapes...”⁶ This description describes perfectly Curtis’s spastic, trance-like dancing. One of the factors that makes Curtis’s performances so shocking is its extreme compression. The extreme discipline and control of the body: forcing the body into postures and movements that appear at once to be both violent and unnatural. To watch Curtis’s live performances is to watch a man overcome by an internal energy force.

In Fisher’s comparison of Joy Division and other rock bands, he illuminates the different forms the libidinal can take. In the case of the performances of the Rolling Stones, Roxy Music, and Iggy Pop, the

libidinal is externalized: the performance of a representation of what culture defines as sex. Like Madonna's interpretations of sex, these simulations are transmitted from a libido-less blank slate, the professional, business (wo)man, mass performer who cobbles together cultural references of what sex looks like and then performs them. In other words, the libidinal being performed is not a performer performing their internal state. When Madonna performs sex, the performance is reliant on reductive stereotypes: the scantily-clad female body writhing on the floor, and the female mouth open in a porn "O." We immediately recognize it for what it is. But with Joy Division the libidinal is internalized, a force of overwhelming energy that cannot be contained.

Rather than performing sex, Ian Curtis abandons himself to his own libidinal energies. What we see, then, is a man enacting his own desires and terrors. This is why his performances were, and remain, so shocking to us. Without the interpretive buffer of cultural translation (his performance emanates from his own overwhelming affects and is not an interpretation of the idea of "sex" or the "libidinal") we are witness to the violent effects of Curtis's internal state, a state of chaos and increasing agitation. As I have argued elsewhere,⁷ contemporary mental illness — in particular depression, anxiety, anorexia, along with the incredible rise in cases of bipolar in the United States — does not appear out of nowhere. There is a direct correlation between the social and our internal state.

Curtis suffered from depression. And how could he not have, growing up working-class during the Thatcher era? As Fisher writes: "Mrs Thatcher just arrived, the long grey winter of Reaganomics on the way, the Cold War still feeding our unconscious with a lifetime's worth of retina-melting nightmares."⁸ Describing Joy Division's direct line from this social landscape, a culture that had heretofore been future-oriented, whose drugs of choice were uppers, Fisher writes: "JD were the sound of British culture's speed comedown, a long slow screaming neural shutdown."⁹

“Britain had been,” he writes, “in every sense, speeding. Speed is a connectivity drug, a drug that made sense of a world in which electronic connections were madly proliferating. But the comedown is vicious.”¹⁰

“Melancholia was Curtis’s art form.”¹¹ The members of Joy Division experienced, from a very young age, the violence of having the frame of their lives cut back. As guitarist Bernard Sumner explains: “I guess what happened in the 60s was that the council decided that it wasn’t very healthy, and something had to go, and unfortunately it was my neighbourhood that went. We were moved over the river to a tower block.”¹² These early experiences, similarly shared by his bandmates, inform the band’s grey soundtracks to a futureless future. Sumner continues: “So when people say about the darkness in Joy Division’s music, by age 22, I’d had quite a lot of loss in my life. The place where I used to live, where I had my happiest memories, all of that had gone. All that was left was a chemical factory. I realised then that I could never go back to that happiness. So there’s this void.”¹³

Curtis’s body becomes the vessel for his sorrow, for his melancholia. And it is through his body and gestures that Curtis performs this affect. Growing up working-class in a culture that ignores and abhors the working class is to find one’s self marginalized both economically and psychically. Add to this the daily subtle and not so subtle insults and slights and what you have is a body filled with sorrow and rage. At the same time, the legacy of this poverty (being raised by parents who’ve grown up in poverty whose parents grew up in poverty) and the violence incurred through the lived experience of this daily poverty, results in trauma. Being told explicitly and non-explicitly by one’s teachers and other authority figures, politicians, and the media that one is worthless affects one’s sense of self. At the same time, being relegated to low-paying jobs results in having both the everyday experiences and outline of one’s life curtailed. The result of these multifaceted experiences of oppression and trauma render one mute. A

body filled with rage and sorrow, that must remain silent in order to survive, is a body reduced to the act of the gesture.

With no escape from one's life, from its constraints, the body becomes the only vehicle through which to perform the unsayable. The terror and hopelessness are internalized, repressed, where they gain power. Like the difference between being forced to watch a close friend die by suicide and watching an actress perform the symbolic gestures that would translate this act. Curtis's live performances were not performances at all, but rather Curtis as distillation. His is an intense compression of the libidinal that has been repressed within. When he appears on stage, his fears, terror, passion, and fury are unleashed. Part of what makes his live performances so powerful, then, is the fact of his having repressed his affects beforehand. This control or jamming-up helps to increase the libidinal energy, resulting in the violence that animates his dancing.

This jamming-up is similar to the libidinal energy in the performances of the Jam, who, as we have seen, came from Woking and grew up in working-class families. In Sean Egan's book *Love with a Passion Called Hate*, Weller explains, "My mum was a cleaner, my dad worked [in] building, so it's not like they were gonna say to me, 'You're gonna go to college son, or university.' They weren't options."¹⁴ Indeed, according to Egan, for the first eighteen years of his life, Weller grew up in a home without an indoor toilet, a bathroom, or hot water. The Jam's entire project was rooted in Woking: their lyrics describe the lives of the working class and the rage and alienation that results due to its imposed limitations. Of his hometown, Weller said, "I still love Woking. Not necessarily what it's become, but obviously my roots are all there, that's where I grew up as a kid and my formative years and all my friends and family, etc."¹⁵ The band entered the British music scene alongside and were lumped in with punk acts like the Clash, even though there were obvious discrepancies. In *Mojo*, in 2004, Weller explained: "The Jam were never seen as hip. We were three

little hicks from hicktown. We were never part of that trendy art school world. We were very much outsiders.”¹⁶

Whereas the Sex Pistols and the Clash expressed resistance against society at large, dressing and performing along these lines, the Jam’s protest was specifically rooted in Woking. This abstraction parallels that in the literary and visual arts, which similarly may utilize aspects of the working class or other marginalized groups in their work to create a sense of “edginess,” or might include references to loaded concepts, but are presented using a detached or vague tone which resists making any concrete statements against the system. Of course, this abstraction is a form of distancing that one learns in art school — how to dilute the message so that the work appears risky without, in fact, taking any risks that might threaten their place within the system. Indeed, a number of punk and new wave bands originated in art schools, including the Clash, Sonic Youth and Talking Heads.

In addition, like Joy Division, the members of the Jam appeared clean-cut, dressing in suits and slacks. And the Jam looked backwards for inspiration rather than forward. Furthermore, the Jam publicly disavowed drug use. In other words, staying true to their working-class origins, their own lived experience meant necessarily seeming, at least superficially, somewhat “out of it,” old-fashioned, and even conservative.

This distinction signals an important difference: those who live within the social and economic constraints of the working class do not necessarily have access to the distance afforded to the middle class, a distance that allows space between themselves and the world. This distance is visible in contemporary art and literature, and especially in work made in the United States. To be middle-class in the US is to live in a separate world. A world apart from war, poverty, lack of healthcare, substandard education, and working a series of low-paying jobs just to survive. This buffer separates

the two worlds. At the same time, this buffer is also visible in culture, where irony and distance are the norm.

This lack of distance, the closeness that appears in the work of the working class, is described by Marguerite Duras as miraculous. In a conversation with Barbara Loden's husband, the filmmaker Elia Kazan, Duras said of *Wanda*:

I think that there is a miracle in *Wanda*. Usually there is a distance between the visual representation and the text, as well as the subject and the action. Here this distance is completely nullified; there is an instant and permanent continuity between Barbara Loden and *Wanda*.¹⁷

The art is infused with the libidinal energy from the body of the working class. In his essay "Going Overground," Mark Fisher writes specifically about the libidinal energy of the Jam: "The Jam, like The Who before them, drew their power from an auto-destructive paradox: they were fueled by a frustration, a tension, a blocked energy, a jam."¹⁸

Fisher's description of Weller's libidinal energy, a clamped-down compression, an inarticulable source that loses its power once it is released *vis a vis* clarity, is comparable to Joy Division's, or more specifically Ian Curtis's, form of the libidinal: visceral, inarticulable, and internal. In the same way you can recognize the libidinal in Weller's compression of words to the point of inarticulation, you can also see it in Curtis's spastic, trance-like dancing. This compression is also an extreme form of vulnerability. Where the middle-class artist stands at a distance, the working-class artist experiences rage and melancholia, she feels her marginalization viscerally and knows who is responsible, but she is unable to speak, with the same distance, about her own oppression. Her affects render her stagnant; rage and melancholia fill her body. As a result, she finds herself running in place. Indeed, this theme occurs over and over in the Jam: in their lyrics and imagery. This state of extreme compression is a language: complex, unruly,

a vernacular that stands for and articulates the working class trapped in neoliberal society.

The compression in Weller and Curtis's bodies is similar to the libidinal of the anorexic. The anorexic body is often imagined as being without desire, due, in part, to the anorexic body's lack of hips and breasts, superficial representations of sex or sexuality. And yet, the act of refusing desire, or rather, the act of refusing the world in order to create a space for one's yet unfulfilled desire, is indeed a libidinal act. The libidinal is an energy force. And the anorexic body, itself a compression of desire, is constructed of this energy. It is the libido in its unadulterated state. The anorexic's body, like the body of Paul Weller, in his seething rage and inarticulation, and the hyper-kinetic body of Ian Curtis, performing a kind of violent dance, is the expression of the libidinal energy within the body. The anorexic starves her body of food, the result of which is a body that has removed all it does not want or need. Or, rather, the anorexic body is one that exists on just enough food (or else she and her body would die).

In the end, her body exists as a symbol she has created, an object that represents her desire. Her body, then, is an extreme distillation of desire. Like Curtis and Weller, the anorexic utilizes her body as a vehicle through which her desire is performed. It would be more accurate, though, to say that the anorexic body, along with Weller and Curtis's, represents desire that cannot be fulfilled. Thus, the clamped-down, jammed-up aspect of the performance. The death drive, which is to say the libidinal, tapped down, trapped inside. Their desire cannot be fulfilled under capitalism because what they want cannot exist within such a system. Class hierarchy is inherent in a capitalist system. There is no way out. Furthermore, Paul Weller and Ian Curtis are not interested in what capitalist culture has to offer — what they want does not exist. The same goes for the anorexic, whose entire system is a system of no. Her no to food is a symbolic no to

the world. What she wants capitalism does not offer. Her no, then, holds a space for her desire for something that cannot yet exist.

An example of the libidinal in the working-class anorexic and the music world is Amy Winehouse. To watch Winehouse perform “Love is a Losing Game” acoustically is to witness the pure libidinal — there is no space between Winehouse and her life, her lyrics, music, or performance. Like Curtis and Weller, however, hers is not a *performance* of the libidinal — rather, every facet of her being is a manifestation of it. Anorexia is, among other things, an attempt at controlling the body, at controlling that which remains beyond one’s control. In early photographs and film footage, Winehouse appears full of life, vivacious. In these images, she is sensual, sexy: her curvy body, her lipstick, her physical gestures emitting desire. But as her success and fame grew, her body became smaller and smaller — as she spiraled further and further into her eating disorder, love, and drug addictions. This second Amy, the one we know from paparazzi photos — disheveled, with an emaciated body, huge beehive, her lips in a sneer — is a portrait of the libidinal in extreme compression.

At this point, the press hounded her, following her everywhere she went, eager to take photographs of her in a state of disarray and disorientation. In performances, this second Amy, her body, her voice, and her being, are an extreme distillation of the previous Amy. She exudes not sensuality and sex but, instead, a fervor, an unrelenting energy. You can sense this energy as it becomes stopped and jammed-up within her tiny body, an infinite energy dictating her mannerisms, movements, and music. This energy becomes so overwhelming, contained inside the body, that at a certain point it must find release. As Freud writes, the pleasure principle works to keep excitement down. The libidinal can be sublimated by making art, and in the case of Winehouse by singing, writing lyrics, dancing, and performing. But then, later, when this internal force becomes too powerful, too infinite, it gets re-routed to other means. An eating disorder is one such

means, as is chain-smoking and the use of drugs and alcohol — all activities Winehouse engaged in compulsively.

As time passes, her body becomes smaller as her life becomes smaller and smaller, compressing, so that she is reduced to the body of a child. Using drugs and starving herself with her boyfriend in a tiny apartment in Camden Town. In the end, Winehouse, like Curtis, becomes a vessel for the libidinal — symbolic, a desperate gesture attempting to convey what is unsayable, words trapped inside the body.

The libido's job is to divert this energy, sending it outwards. As Freud writes, the “libido has the task of making the destroying instinct innocuous, and it fulfills the task by diverting that instinct to a great extent outwards [...]. The instinct is then called the destructive instinct, the instinct for mastery, or the will to power.”¹⁹ The death drive, *Todestrieb*, is the drive toward death and self-destruction defined originally by Sabina Spielrein in her paper, “Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being.” In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud defined it as the “opposition between the ego or death instincts and the sexual or life instincts.”²⁰ There is overlap between the death drive, or what is often simply referred to as “the drive,” and the libidinal energy: both are lifeforces that push us toward pleasure and yet both can result in self-destruction and death.

Often called derogatory names connected to her class, Winehouse was reviled for her refusal to assimilate. Indeed, until her death, the main source of insult for Winehouse was her class. And yet, she clung to her class background: wearing Fred Perry polos, vintage clothing, singing about the places, people, and material objects of the world she came from. For example, in her song “You Know I’m No Good,” she sings:

Meet you downstairs in the bar and hurt,
Your rolled-up sleeves in your skull t-shirt
You say “what did you do with him today?”
And sniffed me out like I was Tanqueray

'Cause you're my fella, my guy
Hand me your Stella and fly

Every reference in this song tethers Winehouse back to her working-class origins.

What the public wants from the working-class female artist is a *Pygmalion* transformation. They want to see the poor, working-class girl with her crooked accent, her bad skin, and poor taste traded in for a clean, sleek, aspirational version of her true self. They will love her if she offers herself unto this trade-off and they will hate her if she resists or refuses.

Amy Winehouse came from a Jewish, working-class family. When she was nine her parents divorced. At the same age, her grandmother suggested she attend the Susi Earnshaw Theatre School to further her vocal skills. While at the school Amy founded her first band, a short-lived rap group called Sweet 'n' Sour, with her friend Juliette Ashby. Many of Winehouse's uncles on her mother's side of the family were jazz musicians, and she grew up listening to jazz — as Winehouse said in an interview with *Dazed Magazine*, “Frank Sinatra, Dinah Washington, Sarah Vaughan. They were always there, in my house.”^{[21](#)}

Amy Winehouse's first album, *Frank* (named after her idol, Frank Sinatra) was released in 2003. *Back to Black*, the album that catapulted Winehouse into the spotlight, was released only three years later. Her first album drew from her roots in jazz, while her second was a tribute to the girl bands she loved, the Ronettes in particular. In photographs, and more strikingly in the 2015 documentary film *Amy* by Asif Kapadia, one can see the drastic change in Winehouse from a healthy young girl, smiling as she performs, to the person we all remember: tiny, frightened, her face frozen before the camera. The story circulating over and around Winehouse before and after her death is that she was an addict, that she died of an overdose. And while there is no disputing her history of addiction, she was clean from drugs when she died. She died, in fact, in her sleep. The coroner report

states that she died from alcohol poisoning, but this actually refers to several causes of death, one of which is a heart attack. But it is likely that she died from a heart attack during her sleep as the result of her lifelong battle with anorexia and bulimia, or even a combination of both: that the lifelong damage her body had suffered as the result of starving, bingeing, and purging had weakened her and made her more vulnerable.

In fact, her close friends from childhood and her brother have stated publicly in interviews that though she struggled with alcohol and drugs, it was her eating disorder that killed her. Winehouse herself was never shy about her struggles with anorexia and bulimia, saying in one interview, “A little bit of anorexia, a little bit of bulimia. I’m not totally OK now but I don’t think any woman is.”²² In an interview with National Public Radio, Asif Kapadia, the director of the documentary film *Amy*, argued that though it was true she had used drugs and alcohol, her history with anorexia and bulimia began at a young age and remained constant throughout her life.²³ In one scene in the film, Janis Winehouse, Amy’s mother, confesses that her daughter had told her and her husband about her bulimia when she was fifteen: how she would binge on foods and then vomit them back up. In another scene in a music studio, Winehouse is described as having binged on an enormous plateful of food, then vanished to the bathroom. Again, in another interview, Kapadia adds, “Bulimia ravaged her body [...] That unfortunately led to her downfall, it was there from when she was very young until the very end.”²⁴ “This is someone who is trying to disappear,” her friend Mos Def says of her in the film. And from music writer Jude Rogers:

Her size got me first. She was tiny, a doll under a huge beehive, which threatened to topple her over. Tottering across the stage in a baby-pink, acid-blue and neon-yellow dress, she sang “Love Is a Losing Game” like none of us imagined she’d be able to sing it.²⁵

Despite her ascendance into pop stardom, Winehouse never forgot where she came from. In fact, from the very beginning, she remained stubbornly loyal to her working-class roots. A punk priestess, she refused to give in or otherwise sugarcoat the truth, never censoring herself regardless of the costs (scoffing, for example, when an interviewer tried to compare her to Dido). Rock, punk, jazz, the blues, and folk all have their roots in the working class. Yet the general public and the media have a long history of rejecting and in fact destroying performers who refuse to play into the rags-to-riches myth. Winehouse fought to the end to preserve who she was and where she came from, donning the look of the Ronettes, acquiring tattoos, and speaking bluntly and honestly in interviews.

The way we hold our bodies, how we move through space is, in essence, who we are; it is where we come from. The shame and low self-esteem that informs all our moments reshapes the mind and the body. It wasn't enough for Amy Winehouse to sing, to write extraordinary songs, to be beautiful and bring her charisma to the stage. She also needed to be "gracious." What can we do in a world that won't accept us, that won't take us in? We could try in vain, nearly killing ourselves in the process, to become what the world wants us to be. Or we could choose to turn away. Sometimes this means isolating ourselves from the world and sometimes this means resisting, often using one's body as a form of language.

The anorexic changes her body into a symbol — thinking, wrongly, that this symbol will be read universally for what it is, what it represents to her. Society mistakenly reads her thin, ravished body as a desire to be beautiful, to be slim, to be liked. They see thinness for what it means to them: conformity to the culture's norms, instead of the remaking of one's body into a language of No — a fierce and powerful rebellion against culture, against the violent forces that insist she turn her will over to that culture's ideals. The force and determination of the anorexic's will is unrelenting. It is the kind of power that allows her not to eat for days, to then run fifteen

miles through rain or snow or tremendous heat, with no source of power inside her body. The sheer force of will it takes to transform a healthy body to what amounts to a cadaver is something to be reckoned with.

An eating disorder can be a means to control how much one takes in of the world. With anorexia, when the body becomes tiny, a child's, the sufferer vanishes. As a result of chronic anorexia, the sufferer's mind becomes scattered, her voice stutters, becomes slurred. The stutter is, in itself, an enactment of shock in response to the world's actions. The second part of *Amy* is the descent. The things the paparazzi said to her, the words the media wrote about her, the constant prying, the exploitative photographs — it's no wonder she became speechless, incoherent in interviews, hollow-eyed in photographs. We were on the outside watching, devouring. But she was inside, living it.

Coincidentally, the anorexic's desire or need to say no, to control how much of the world she takes in, is often a response to the world having said no to her, to the world's refusal to take in or digest her. Eating disorders are often, mistakenly, considered to be a white, middle-class problem. This is, of course, just one more stereotype that works to silence the many older women, the men, the poor and working-class and non-white sufferers. But what this stereotype also does is minimize the suffering of those afflicted with it. Anorexia and bulimia are both mental illnesses — and anorexia is the number one killer of all mental illnesses.²⁶ To suffer from an eating disorder and come from a working-class background is to be caught in a double bind. Amy Winehouse was an incredibly gifted singer, writer, and musician, but the world didn't know what to do with her. Her complexities were too diverse. In an interview she said:

When I was a little kid it was my dream to go to drama school, but it was never something I thought would happen to me. I was a Jewish girl from north London and things like that don't happen to Jewish girls from north London called Amy Winehouse.²⁷

This mythology of herself that Winehouse cultivated is one of a working-class, Jewish British jazz singer, which is to say her cultivated persona was not cultivated, it was herself. Furthermore, as time passed, Winehouse hewed closer to this persona: her beehive became bigger, her clothes more and more scant, her references to her working-class life both more specific and more often appearing in her songs. This reminds me of Jason Molina, who we will discuss later, and how he collected objects and ephemera that reminded him of his working-class origins, while at the same time cultivated what could be seen as an exaggerated version of these origins, wearing cowboy hats and bolos.

For Curtis and Winehouse, the extreme compression of the libidinal energy becomes a death drive. There is no space between life and the music: their lived experience was channeled directly to the music. Writing for *Smash Hits*, Alastair Macaulay described Joy Division's second album *Closer* as an "exercise in dark controlled passion."²⁸ "Controlled passion" is an apt description for the libidinal, the repressed, which then switches over into the death drive. In "Heart and Soul," for example, Curtis sings:

Existence well what does it matter?
I exist on the best terms I can.
The past is now part of my future,
The present is well out of hand.

And in "Back to Black," Winehouse sings:

You went back to what you knew
So far removed from all that we went through
And I tread a troubled track
My odds are stacked
I'll go back to black

No simulation, no translation, the libidinal energy, internalized, was the same energy utilized for writing lyrics, making music. Such a direct and powerful current, with no means for siphoning off, can only lead to combustion. Winehouse died of a heart attack, resulting from her chronic anorexia, and Curtis of suicide by hanging. The libidinal energy trapped inside their bodies — pulsating, overwhelming — informs every aspect of their lives and, in the end, overcomes them, the death drive, taking over.

CHAPTER SIX

THE UNDEAD

Antigone's point of view can only be approached, can only be lived or thought about, from the place of that limit where her life is already lost, where she is already on the other side.

— Jacques Lacan

Existing between two deaths, the working class, like Antigone, driven by one stubborn demand (that they be removed from symbolic death) having been pushed beyond the limit, has reached an impasse. Not interested in providing context or explanation, not interested in compromise, the working class exists between worlds or deaths, their very existence a form of refusal. As Žižek writes, “the apparitions that emerge in the domain ‘between two deaths’ address to us some unconditional demand, and it is for this reason that they incarnate pure drive without desire.”¹

The very concept of wanting to “become someone” already implies a splitting of the self. When I left my hometown to become someone, I did not know what or who I wanted to become, only that the person I was had proved faulty and that in order to survive in the world, I needed to improve myself, to become something, someone else. The hours I spent before the television attempting to propel myself back in time into Warhol’s Factory, and the afternoons and weekends imagining myself as a mod alongside the Jam circa 1972, were early attempts at willing myself into another, in my mind, improved version of myself. And though, obviously, these acts proved useless, merely engaging in this longing already resulted in relief. During the hours I imagined myself as someone else, I felt better. Just the act of imagining myself as someone out in the world alongside artists or musicians I admired created an armor around myself, a means of protection.

Though not all working-class artists appear melancholic, all the working-class musicians I researched for this book suffer from melancholia. This even includes such seemingly non-melancholic artists like Bruce Springsteen and Paul Weller. Furthermore, the question of abandoning one's working-class origins becomes complicated with regard to such artists, especially Springsteen. Superficially, it appears that Springsteen embraced his working-class background and then sailed immediately into a life of success. And yet, in his memoir *Born to Run*, he writes of how in order to survive he had to invent another version of himself, describing how, when he was seven, sitting in front of the television with his mother, he saw Elvis Presley, and realized there was another way, that he could create an identity apart from "the lifeless, sucking black hole" of his childhood.² Upon seeing Elvis on the TV screen, Springsteen saw how he might escape his fate. Years later, he describes how, when driving with a friend, celebrating his success, he experienced the first of two mental breakdowns. A lifetime of debilitating depression has followed, a depression that requires a variety of medications and regular visits to a psychoanalyst.³

Similarly, like Springsteen, Sparklehorse's Mark Linkous describes how when he saw Alice Cooper on television, he saw a way out of a future of working in the mines. The conceit of acquiring an identity and wearing it like an armor over the authentic but vulnerable self repeats. David Bowie, also working-class, lived his entire life as one persona and then another. After years of quick transitions between Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, and then the Thin White Duke, he also had a breakdown, one which resulted in his relocation to Berlin and his work there with Eno, resulting in the Berlin trilogy. This armor, the persona(s) we create and become, is always only a prosthetic: we can never truly become this other character.

But what happens to the working-class subject while they're masked in the persona of another, more palatable self? Furthermore, what happens to the working-class subject when they divide into two? Like the glitch

zombies or the undead experience in films, when the working-class subject armors herself with an alternative persona, this armor eventually ruptures. In the end, in other words, the truth will out.

When such fissures occur and the true, working-class human is revealed, often a form of mental breakdown results, and the melancholia, kept thus far at bay, appears. This is the case for the majority of the artists discussed in this book. The use and abuse of alcohol and drugs, prescribed or otherwise, may avert either or both occurrences. But such medical interventions only serve to repress the inevitable. This splitting of the self — of the conscious and unconscious, the true working-class self and the persona/armor — results in a doubling or a ghosting, where one self is abandoned for another and, in the process, the subject, existing in the liminal space between, no longer knows which version of themselves they are.

This armor or doubling is sometimes fully formed, like Bowie's various personalities or Springsteen's working-class persona (constructed of his father's work clothes). But often this armor is less complete: not an entirely other personality, but rather consisting of a symbolic object repressing another persona, like, as we shall see later, Jason Molina's cowboy hats and Western shirts (even though he was from Ohio). Such devices create an alternative persona, a double; a costume the artist might hide within or behind. But such devices necessarily leave the actual artist behind, in the form of a ghost or trace. Such operations bring up the question of who the double is. Is it the constructed persona? Or is it the artist themselves? In other cases, objects that hold symbolic meaning, representing one's working-class home, can also serve as a kind of prosthetic, holding the place for the lost loved object.

Charlyn "Chan" Marie Marshall, the musician behind the band Cat Power, appeared in her early performances with long hair that covered her face, her body overwhelmed in oversized tops and jeans. Often, like Mark

Linkous, she performed with her back toward the audience, speaking so softly she was indecipherable. Later, after she became the muse of designers such as Karl Lagerfeld and Marc Jacobs, she appeared as a rehabilitated version of herself: in Chanel clothing, her long hair styled sleekly. Her music, previously deeply informed by the blues and traditionals, became unrecognizable pop, no longer indistinguishable from other ready-made female acts: her voice lost under the overpowering effects of overdubbing.

Marshall's early music serves as a conduit through which the melancholia of the working class, and specifically the working class from the American South, moves directly. These first five albums — *Dear Sir*, *Myra Lee*, *What Would the Community Think*, *Moon Pix*, and *The Covers Record* — though quite different from one another, share a number of qualities. The songs are stripped down, consisting usually of either only Marshall's voice or Marshall playing guitar with a drummer. The lyrics are written in the style of the blues. Stripped down, with often just a few simple statements repeated, the songs, like blues songs, convey their emotion through their lyrics as much as through their tone and music. Indeed, it is often unclear what words are being sung. In other words: Marshall uses her voice as an instrument, rather than as a means to communicate literal information. Like a radio station between dials, these early recordings convey rather than explain.

Marshall comes from a working-class family with deep roots in the South. Her father, Charlie Marshall, a blues musician who also worked odd jobs to support his family, comes from Talladega, a small mill town in central Alabama; Marshall's mother's family comes from southern Georgia, where they worked in a cotton mill.

In interviews, Marshall insists that her songs are not depressing, or rather that they are not solely depressing. Instead, as she explains, they are redemptive. Cat Power's early music is deeply rooted in reality — the objects, landscape, and everyday life of her own working-class experience.

In an interview with William Van Meter, she explains, “I felt that those songs were triumphant. In order to survive, I had to explain reality.”⁴ The trouble is that the reality of the working class in the United States is not something that the middle class wants to hear. Making music of the sorrow that is the direct result of living in poverty, of living without agency, can result only in a melancholic music, a dirge, a form of the blues.

In 1991 Marshall moved out of her father’s home to Cabbagetown, a former mill town in the southeast of Atlanta. As Roni Sarig writes in his essay on Cat Power, “cabbagetown kid,” “It’s the same neighborhood her maternal great-grandfather settled when he ran away from south Georgia’s dirt farms early this [twentieth] century. And it’s the same area, on the east side of Atlanta, where she was born nearly 27 years go.”⁵ In “The Triumph and Tragedy of the Cabbagetown Sound, Part 1 of 2: Have You Heard Death Singing?,” Scott Freeman describes Cabbagetown during the early nineties when Marshall arrived: “The village and its row houses, in the shadow of the historic Oakland Cemetery, were built in the 1880s to accommodate workers from the Appalachian mountains who came to Atlanta to work at the adjacent Fulton Bag and Cotton Mill.”⁶

In Cabbagetown, Marshall worked at a pizza shop, made friends with other musicians, attended their shows and, eventually, began to make her own music. During the time she lived there, among other musicians and poets, she met the musician Benjamin Smoke. Described by Scott Freeman in his oral history as “the most avant-garde person in Atlanta: a flamboyant drag queen,”⁷ his music was described by the film critic A.O. Scott as “chanted more than sung, over the sounds of the band Smoke, which features a droning banjo, a squalling electric guitar and a keening cello.”⁸

Benjamin Smoke, born Robert Dickerman in rural Georgia in 1960, performed in a number of art bands, eventually beginning his own, Smoke, in 1992. While performing with Smoke, he sat on a stool and sang songs of excruciating sorrow in his raw and ruined voice. The world of

Cabbagetown, a small community of mostly working-class Southern artists and musicians, and the sound of this world — specifically the rich, melancholic, sparse music and lyrics of Smoke — deeply inform Marshall’s early aesthetic. This “death music,” a music that conveys poverty, marginalization, the legacy of the American working class and the South, becomes a form of public weeping — a beautiful whisper, a music the listener must lean in to hear.

In 1992, Marshall fled Cabbagetown and moved to New York City because, as she said, there were too many drugs, too many deaths. She left because she understood her fate. But leaving home means becoming someone or something else, it means leaving our self, disappearing. Like entering a liminal space between our origins and what we hope to “become,” we vanish, entering a realm between two deaths. In New York, Marshall worked three to four jobs at a time: waiting tables, unloading trucks, and working as a maid. “The way that I had been living was potatoes and rice [...] Or stealing cans of tuna from Key Foods.”⁹ In 1994, in one day, she recorded her first two albums, *Dear Sir* and *Myra Lee*.

In *Dear Sir*’s “The Sleepwalker,” Marshall writes of leaving the poverty of her past. The album, released in 1995, describes not only the literal leaving of her Southern home but also the consequence of her leaving, her own disappearance. At the start of the song, she sings:

I can hear – voices in the water
Coming up like smoke brings the wind
I have to take some time to relocate that house of mine
I think I must of lost it in the river

The working-class artist and her connection with reality is evident in the work of artists who ground their work in the world. For example, Mark Linkous, Paul Weller, and Jason Molina root their writing in the landscape and people of their origins. Like these artists, Chan Marshall’s early work is

also bound to the reality of men and women who work with their body and their hands. In “Great Expectations,” also from *Dear Sir*, she sings:

I dig in this ocean and I try to fill it with gold
Fill it to the top, fill it to the top, fill it to the top

Here, with the simple, everyday language of the blues, Marshall speaks to the quest for meaning for those who, despite their commitment to work, find themselves lost, unable to move through their daily regimen of labor. With “I dig in this ocean and I try to fill it with gold/Fill it to the top,” she is speaking to the relentless conveyor belt of labor and one’s attempt to earn a living, and even perhaps move out of one’s current condition — to no avail. And when she sings, “I am like powder, I am like relaxation,” she is speaking of transcendence or, at least, a desire for transcendence. To look squarely at reality — and to attempt to convey what one sees — is neither easy, nor is it popular. Middle-class critics of Cat Power’s first albums tended to consider the work inferior, claiming it was “self-indulgent” or “depressing.” Not surprisingly, this is also what middle-class critics see when they look at the unfiltered lives of the working class.

Cat Power’s early albums are depressing — because what they are attempting to convey are modes of despair. In fact, on her first two albums, her inarticulation is a coherent translation of melancholia. When she uses her voice, when she allows it to break, to crack, and when she hesitates and mumbles, she is performing her inability to speak; of reaching the threshold of speechlessness, the place we find ourselves when recognizing that regardless of how much we work, we won’t move forward.

In 1997, Marshall left New York and moved to Prosperity, South Carolina with the musician Bill Callahan of Smog. “In New York,” Marshall explained, “I was like, ‘Oh my God, I can’t breathe, I can’t look at people in the eye, I can’t speak, I’m going insane.’”¹⁰ In South Carolina, as she has repeatedly throughout her life, Marshall quit music and tried to

settle into a quieter life back in the South. In Prosperity, Marshall and Callahan rented a modest clapboard house off Highway 51.¹¹ In the fall, while Callahan was away on tour, Marshall had a dream: “I got woken up by someone in the field behind my house in South Carolina,” she explained, “The earth started shaking, and dark spirits were smashing up against every window of my house.”¹²

In that night, she wrote six of the songs that would appear on her fourth album, 1998’s *Moon Pix*. At the crux of the hallucination was the idea of redemption, specifically that the voices would go away if Marshall would just renounce her past. As she explains, “A voice was telling me my past would be forgotten if I would just meet him — whoever he was — in the field.”¹³ Afraid, Marshall drove the next day to New York City to seek help from priests and from friends. Her friends told her she should seek help, that what she was experiencing was a kind of mental break, but when she returned to South Carolina she received a phone call that a friend had died. Later that same day, she learned that another friend had also died. “So that’s when I woke up,” she said, “I was like you know what? What am I doing?”¹⁴

Marshall contacted the Australian band the Dirty Three, inquiring whether they might be interested in working with her. When they answered in the affirmative, she booked a ticket and flew to Australia. After three months of not recording anything, *Moon Pix* was recorded in five uninterrupted days. The result is an intensity unlike her other albums, as Jayson Greene writes: “As a result, the band plays as if sleepwalking across a five-lane highway — everything sounds high-stakes and somehow perfectly in place.”¹⁵ One of the songs, “Peking Saint,” was recorded in the bathroom of one of the band members with one microphone. The combination of reality — the lack of studio overdubbing or mixing of the music or Marshall’s voice, along with the stripped-down lyrics informed by Marshall’s love for the blues and traditionals — alongside the intensity,

what can be called the libidinal or drive transmitted into the music (affect sublimated from the body directly into the music), is what makes *Moon Pix* such an extraordinary album.

Two years after *Moon Pix*, Marshall released an album of covers titled *The Covers Record*. Stripped down and not unlike her previous albums, it includes renditions of songs by Nina Simone, Smog, and the Rolling Stones, as well as traditionals. *The Covers Record* is a spectacular album: distilled, exacting, and minimal. There is a definitive shift, though, with this album. The recording is cleaner, more “professional,” less raw. The previous element of roughness or “nowness” is gone.

After *The Covers Record*, Cat Power’s music changed dramatically: the sparse, blues-like music and lyrics are replaced by upbeat pop songs. The albums are heavily mastered, the music no longer has any of the previous elements, the very characteristics that defined it. Marshall’s voice is no longer recognizable — and this now unrecognizable voice is lost beneath layers of overdubbed instruments. The result is a homogeneous music — indistinguishable from other pop acts being recorded in American studios. After *The Covers Record*, too, Marshall entered popular culture: becoming a muse for fashion designers like Marc Jacobs and Karl Lagerfeld, and modelling for Chanel.

Looking back to the night in South Carolina when Marshall was awoken by ghosts, it is as if she found herself inside a flash of liminal space, consisting of the past and the future. “A voice was telling me my past would be forgotten if I would just meet him — whoever he was — in the field.”¹⁶ It seems she was given an ultimatum: forsake your past and survive, or remain with your past and be destroyed. Given the option of two deaths — to die in the past or forsake your past, which is to say to forsake yourself, but survive — which death do you choose?

Of that experience, Marshall made one of her strongest albums. Libidinous, *Moon Pix* is a chronicle of danger, a passing over from one

death to another. As if able to access a flash of history akin to Benjamin's flash of danger, Marshall was able to chronicle and fold in, through her music, lyrics, and voice, a mapping of history. Some of the songs on the album do just this, while others seem to record this dangerous crossing over. In "Cross Bones Style," she sings:

Oh, how time flies
With crystal clear eyes
And cold as coal
When you're ending with diamond eyes

The first line describes the flash of history, its fluidity and movement; and how history is now, it is not fixed. The last two lines address the move from one world to the other: the "coal" of her working-class, Southern origins, and then the "ending" with "diamond," not coal, "eyes."

Jason Molina, the musician behind the bands Songs: Ohia and the Magnolia Electric Co., grew up in a working-class family in Lorain, Ohio, in a trailer park along Lake Erie. Molina's childhood was spent by the lake, and visiting his relatives in the mining towns of West Virginia, where he spent summers with his grandmother.¹⁷ While visiting her, he and his father combed the nearby woods for Civil War artifacts. As a child, Molina began collecting things: losing himself in the trailer park where he grew up. This habit of collecting stayed with him his entire life. Along with the objects he collected from the world, Molina also collected objects from his home, his working-class origins, and its worlds, both literal (the factories of Lorain and Lake Erie) and a world he mythologized. This world included the moon, animals, and nature. Though he left Lorain for good when he moved away for college, the work he made after he left was constructed from this place. In a 1999 interview for the fanzine *Copper Press*, a twenty-four-year-

old Molina said of his hometown and its role in his formation, “I grew up in a burnt-out shipbuilding and steel making town... Lorain and I have an unspoken agreement to always remain in each other’s lives. It is a hard place.”¹⁸

From early on Molina identified with the aspects of his working-class childhood and his family background: the love he felt for his West Virginia coal mining relations, his interest in its landscape and rich history, and his affinity with the working class in and around Lorain, its abandoned shipbuilding and steelmaking factories and the people who lived and worked there. And yet, when he left Lorain for the private, liberal arts university Oberlin College, where he attended on a scholarship, he also left these important connections behind.

While a student at Oberlin, Molina was acutely aware of the wealth and cultural disparity between himself and his classmates, and he made no attempt to conceal his social class. Instead, he appeared to others as an eccentric: drawing attention to his working-class background by showcasing it through his clothing and obsessions, such as his admiration for past musical acts and his continued practice of collecting. These acts of adorning and surrounding himself with paraphernalia that reminded him of his background was a practice he continued for the rest of his life.

This looking to the past, and not forward, informed many of his aesthetic choices. For instance, his love of the mixtape, and, later, his insistence on making hand-drawn artwork for his albums. His interest in music rooted in the past stood in sharp contrast to his classmates and the overall tenor of the time, where the idea of progress meant improvement, and, therefore, that work from the past was considered obsolete, old-fashioned, and conservative.

It isn’t coincidental that “progress” forms part of the word “progressive,” often used by the moderate wing of the Democratic Party and other liberals. This idea that the future is where all improvement will

occur, and indeed the ideology of aspiration that is entwined with it, is deeply connected to neoliberalism. By default, such an ideology insists that the past and history is of little to no use. Use is an important term here — the ideology of neoliberalism could be reduced to the term *use* — anything or anyone who is of no use in the advancement of capitalism, neoliberalism implies, is of no use at all. To entertain notions or to engage in activities of no use, then, is to appear lazy, useless, a “loser.” Molina’s insistence on the past and, in particular, on music of the past, is a radical departure because it refuses to engage in neoliberalism’s delirium of constant renewal and its blind belief in the new.

This connection Molina makes with his working-class background, his home, and his past, and his resistance to progress, is shared by Mark Linkous from the band Sparklehorse. Like Marshall, as we saw above, Linkous followed a circuitous route away from his origins and then back to the rural South where he began. And like Marshall, the realization that the slickness of the city is destructive and not something to aspire to informs Linkous’s work. Indeed, in the documentary *Sparklehorse=Mark Linkous=Southern Man* by Lotje Ijzermans, Linkous says that his work finally got good when he came back to the South. Indeed, he says, his work got good not just upon his return to the South, but, along with it, his having given up on a career in music. When making music became worthy for its own sake, then, he says, his work got good.^{[19](#)}

Turning away from the slickness of the city and its neoliberal ideals and focus on the individual for themselves only and the belief that the ultimate goal in life is to accrue wealth and power, Linkous turned instead toward his beginnings in the South. As Jonathan Perry writes, “Linkous moved back to Richmond, joined a band that played nothing but ‘300-year-old Irish songs,’ and basically discarded everything he thought he knew about music.”^{[20](#)}

This is manifest in Linkous's song "Spirit Ditch," which he closes with the recording of a voicemail from his mother. In this rupture, Linkous interrupts the listeners' expectations of what they expect to hear at the end of a song (a guitar riff, for example) and, at the same time, what we expect from a "Southern" musician by presenting us with something even more "authentic" (his own mother's voice speaking in an unmistakably Southern accent). Like the graininess of *Wanda* and Barbara Loden's interest in Warhol's factory films, which are centered on the quotidian, awkwardness, and the error, Linkous' work upon his return to Virginia is similarly tethered to the breath of real life.

In an interview with *Pitchfork*, Linkous spoke of his desire to write simple pop songs that he would then smear over with crackle and noise:

I tried to imagine if you were in another satellite or if you were floating in space and you heard these amazing pop songs that were short and really simple, not unlike Buddy Holly songs, but you wanted to fuck 'em up in a way, but not gratuitously.^{[21](#)}

This act of "dirtying" the songs performs a resistance against the slickness of the music world. At the same time, the songs incorporate ruptures or interruptions, enacting a dialectic: Linkous, from the rural South, lived both in the past, referencing his origins (eg, utilizing the waltz in his music) and in the future (eg, including the simulation of crickets in a song rather than the recording of actual crickets). In other words: Linkous lived in two separate worlds or, perhaps, somewhere in the space between them.

Linkous often distorted his own voice by using a destroyed microphone he found in a landfill. When performing live, he'd play a recording of his voice, warped. This sonic chaos creates a simulation of the slurry, the black dust Linkous describes remembering on the faces of his coal-mining grandfather and father, the dust that enters the lungs, resulting in black lung and often death. For Linkous, this distortion served both to "dirty up" his

clean pop songs but also to disguise his voice, a voice he said in interviews he felt ashamed of.

Linkous was raised by his grandparents in Charlottesville, and like Barbara Loden spent his formative years in Appalachia, in the coal mining country of Dickinson County, and it is this world that his songs are tethered to. For example, in “Tears on Fresh Fruit,” he writes of the danger of working in the mines, and the powerlessness of a child watching his mother or grandmother’s grief at losing her husband in the violence of coal mining:

Just when you’ve found your way to
The boiler room
They come to dig you out
With picks and shovels and
Acetylene torches
I couldn’t do nothing but watch as her tears fell on fresh
fruit

This life, the life of mining, a life the men in his family lived, he was able, by making music, to escape. And yet it haunts his music. His childhood, the people in it, its objects and landscape, are the material from which Linkous constructs his writing and music. And though he never returned to live in the same towns he grew up in, he returned to the South after living in New York and Los Angeles, and lived there for the rest of his life. Indeed, his return to the South was an endless and nomadic journey that propelled him further and further away from towns and cities. In an interview with Alexander Laurence, he described his home in Virginia, where he moved after returning back to the South, “I live in a big, old farmhouse. There’s no town. There’s nothing there.”²²

In the same interview, Linkous explained how his background informed his work: “I am really inspired by really old balladeers. Stuff that was recorded down in that part of Virginia. Old women singing these old songs

in their living rooms.”²³ In his songs he refers to this landscape, its mountains and hollows, to the sediment and sunlight, and to the trains that pull through the towns. In several songs he uses an actual train set as an instrument, and even has a song constructed entirely of this sound, “Little Bastard Choo Choo”. Linkous’s father, grandfathers, and all of his uncles worked in the mines (one of his grandfathers died from black lung, the result of breathing coal dust). In numerous interviews Linkous said that making music was the one way he was able to escape a life of doing the same. Indeed, according to an article by Richard Thomas for *Flaunt Magazine*, as a teenager Linkous had already begun working in the mines:

Mark Linkous comes from a long line of Southwestern Virginia deep miners. Up until three years ago, his father still hauled coal. As a teenager, Linkous rode his dirtbike out to strip-mining jobs on the mountain. When he was done, he’d walk alone in the woods for hours.²⁴

As soon as Linkous finished high school, he left Virginia for New York City, where he formed the band the Dancing Hoods. After, he left for Los Angeles to get signed. In the end, the group disbanded and Linkous ended up living in a van in LA. Despondent and addicted to heroin, Linkous’s life was dramatically changed when he heard a song played on his transistor radio. As Max Blau explains in his essay “The Sad and Beautiful World of Sparklehorse”:

“I was close to just giving up and walking into the ocean,” he later said in 2001. But before that happened, he heard a radio DJ play a breathtaking version of ‘Jesus’ Blood Never Failed Me Yet,’ English minimalist composer Gavin Bryars’ 19-minute loop of a homeless man warbling the six-word phrase over a string ensemble featuring vocal accompaniment from Tom Waits.”²⁵

Hearing the song convinced Linkous not to give up and to return to the South.

In an article in *The Hook*, Linkous said of his return home, “I needed an antidote to the glitz and glamour of Los Angeles”:

All I wanted to do as a teenager was escape, but later on, after I’d been in New York and LA, one of the most special memories of mine was walking and spending time in the mountains alone — one of those things you don’t appreciate until it’s gone.^{[26](#)}

In *Pop Matters*, Mehan Jayasuriya wrote, “Linkous came from a long line of coal miners and seemed to understand that his sadness was both inherited from and inextricably bound to the land from which he came.”^{[27](#)}

This sadness is the melancholy of having lost the loved object of one’s home, of one’s origins, and yet being unable to define what it is that has been lost. It isn’t simply that Linkous left the South and came back, or that he was able to escape the legacy of coal mining. This deep sorrow that informs all his work is the same sorrow that engulfed him. He suffered from depression throughout his adult life, something he spoke candidly of in interviews. In the *Chicago Tribune*, for instance, he is quoted as saying, “I’ve had problems with depression for a long time, and it just got really bad for three years. It was this vortex I couldn’t climb out of.”^{[28](#)}

In London in 1996 while on tour with Radiohead, Linkous took a mixture of valium and antidepressants, which left him unconscious on the floor of his hotel room. When paramedics discovered him, his legs had been pinned under his body for fifteen hours. Following a heart attack and resuscitation, during which he remained clinically dead, Linkous was delivered to St Mary’s Hospital in Paddington. He remained there for twelve weeks, while he underwent a number of operations and procedures. For much of that time it was unclear whether he would ever walk again.

After his release, he spent six months in a wheelchair. His song “St Mary” was written for the nurses at the hospital:

Blanket me sweet nurse
And keep me from burnin’
I must get back
To the woods dear girls

His overdose was apparently unintentional and consisted of what he called “Mexican Valium,” or what is also sometimes called the “forget pill.” Linkous often spoke of touring and how much he hated it, but that it was a necessary evil in order to earn a living. Like Cat Power, he suffered terrible stage fright, wearing a cap and sunglasses on stage, often singing with his back to the audience. He spoke openly of the fear he had of performing night after night.

It is interesting to me that his overdose was on “forget pills.” What was he trying to forget? The moment — the terror of performance — or the past — where he came from? And how does shame, a lifetime of shame interpolated onto the working-class body, factor into this? The wound of being seen as never good enough, of being seen as a monstrosity — the result of being of a class that is constantly looked down on, denigrated, and yet, at the same time, according to society, does not exist. The result of this violence, this wound, is a sorrow that permeates everything. And yet, in order to perform, in order to survive, one must somehow miraculously forget everything. And yet, our working-class origins remain, haunting us. As Breece D’J Pancake, a working-class Appalachian writer, wrote to his mother in a letter after having left:

I’m going to come back home to W.Va. when this is over. There’s something ancient and deeply-rooted in my soul. I like to think that I have

left my ghost up one of those hollows, and I'll never be able to leave for good until I find it...[29](#)

Jason Molina, like Linkous, left his working-class home while, at the same time, turning away from the slick, sleek, prepackaged musical acts of his time, despite the fact that this was, and continues to be, the direction of culture. While those around him tended to look to the future of rock music, Molina stood firmly in the past, inspired by Hank Williams, the Carter Family, Tammy Wynette and others. As many of his friends moved to the excessive style of popular musical acts — playing arenas, wearing costumes, and other over-the-top antics — Molina moved further and further into silence and simplicity. Not only did he turn to the past for inspiration, he also performed covers of those bands from the past he loved. This act of covering acts from the past can also be seen as a means of simulation: by stepping into the shoes, so to speak, of these bands now gone, Molina transplanted himself into the past.

The further Molina moved away from his origins, the more he accumulated objects, as if this practice of collecting could somehow keep him tethered to his working-class home. Importantly, the trinkets, relics, and ephemera he collected were always tethered to his past. He did this for the rest of his life, bringing his collections along with him as he toured. As his biographer, Erin Osmon, writes,:

Throughout his life Jason amassed piles of historical trinkets, war-related ephemera, and outdoor gear. He carried collections of compasses, tiny brass cannons, animal bones, whistles, Boy Scout badges, original G.I. Joe dolls, pendants, bandanas, flags, football cards, pewter figurines of presidents, antique coins, Roosevelt dimes, Confederate dollars, and cigar boxes from city to city. [30](#)

There is a sense, then, that through this act of compulsive collecting, Molina was attempting to find objects that might hold the place of his missing past, his lost loved object. As if these objects could carry within them the void of this loss, a loss that was invisible, and impossible to locate.

Like a phantom limb, the lost loved object haunts the melancholic, and this compulsive collecting is just one example of it. Like Proust's madeleine that calls lost memories of his childhood to him, collecting objects from the past, and specifically from his working-class past, Molina is similarly able to keep his lost loved object within his periphery. This act of replacement — of the original lost object with these collected objects — allows Molina to engage in the now.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes how the phantom limb serves as the depository of memory: "The memories called up before the patient induce in him a phantom limb, not as an image in associationism summons up another image, but because any memory reopens time lost to us and invites us to recapture the situation evoked."³¹ Like Merleau-Ponty's phantom limb, these objects serve as holders of memory. Without these prosthetics, these replacements for the lost loved object, it is likely Molina would be unable to appear in the world, relegated instead to the torpor and narcosis of melancholia's all-encompassing pull.

Like Linkous, Molina said he saw ghosts from as early as childhood. The word "ghost" derives from the Old English, *gast* meaning "breath"; "good or bad spirit," "angel," "demon"; "person," "man," "human being," and in Biblical use, the word means "soul," "spirit," or "life." Then there is Hegel's *Geist*, an animating force that drives us — similar, of course to the death drive or the libidinal. Hegel's *Geist* can also mean "mind" and "spirit" as well as the "mind" of an individual and the "spirit" of a people. Of course, the word also stands for a supernatural being. In addition, the word can also mean a double, as in one's "ghost." This definition of the word seems most fitting for Molina, who left a version of himself, if not his "true

self,” behind when he left his home. This version of himself, the Jason Molina of Ohio, of Lake Erie, is a kind of ghost, or double, of the Jason Molina who he became, the musician. This essential element of who he was remained in Lorain, among the landscape, people, and objects of that place — this was a loss from which he could never recover. This is at the heart of the melancholia of class — returning to Freud’s definition of melancholia, this aspect of himself can both never be recovered and cannot be named. Melancholia lives on forever. There is no antidote.

The practice of compulsive collecting includes within it an aspect of trauma. One need only look to Walter Benjamin’s essay on book collecting, “Unpacking My Library,” to understand how compulsive collecting, as a sustained practice, is, among other things, a means to ward off the ongoing tide of trauma. As Benjamin writes, “Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories.”³²

Collecting or, in some cases archiving, is common among post-World War II German artists and writers. One example is the painter Gerhard Richter, whose project “Atlas,” an ongoing archive he has been at work on since the mid-1960s, consists of photographs, newspaper clippings, and sketches. Because Richter’s project is ongoing, it is clear his collecting is less about each particular item added to this living archive and more about the actual practice of collecting itself. It is as if by compulsively adding to the archive, Richter can keep memory and history alive. At the same time, the ongoing-ness of the project, the necessity of constant engagement with it, keeps history, memory, and trauma at bay.

Molina’s family often intervened with his compulsive collecting, confiscating his objects. And yet, these interruptions made no dent in his process. Like his alcoholism, a compulsion he was unable to stop despite repeated attempts, his compulsive collecting was a manifestation of the death drive, an endless movement toward the reduction of painful emotion that gains momentum through the very attempt at discipline.

With this crucial understanding of the role collecting plays in Molina's survival, we can perhaps gain a better comprehension of the importance of his songwriting, which can be seen as not just an act of making art but also, critically, a means of creating a kind of living archive. It is as if each song, each line, were a stitch in a quilt constructed almost entirely of memory and objects that hold these memories. Indeed, in his song "Blue Factory Smoke," Molina writes of his own death, incorporating the objects of his home, as if the song were a kind of montage or collage:

When I die
put my bones in an empty street
to remind me of how it used to be
Don't write my name on stone
bring a Coleman lantern and a radio
a Cleveland game and two fishing poles
and watch with me from the shore
Ghostly steel and iron ore
ships coming home
Where I am paralyzed by the emptiness

Clearly iron age beasts
you can tell by the rust and by the chains
And by the oil that they bleed
a crew of crows fly the skulls and bones
They fly the colors of their homes
I fly the cross of the blue factory flame
Stitched with heavy sulphur thread
They ain't proud colors but they're true
colors of my home

And yet, everything that Molina left behind when he left —his working-class origins, his home, its objects, its people — remains both elusive and haunts him. He alludes to this in his song “A Little at a Time”:

I start looking back for the things I used to live by
If only I could remember them
Even one of them
You can't lose it all at once, can you really
Cause brother I've been trying

Like Linkous, early on Molina recognized his limited options — working in a factory or joining the military — and decided on neither. Instead, he enrolled at Oberlin College, twelve miles from his hometown, working a number of jobs to pay his way through his schooling³³. Later, as a musician, he continued working low-wage jobs to support himself.

Throughout his musical career, Molina worked with a rotating group of musicians. At the same time, he created, performed, and recorded under various musical monikers. Molina's desire to work in this way, working essentially as a solitary musician without a home, parallels his own life experience. Once he left his home, he spent the rest of his life traveling and moving from town to town, never settling down. Indeed, Molina died homeless, in poverty. A transient living in a small apartment in poverty, his closest friend was another homeless man, unknown to Molina's friends and family, who himself was also nomadic.

Molina's songs are constructed of a deep sorrow, and speak to the melancholia of class. He left his working-class origins in order to become a musician and was fortunate enough to realize this aim. It was because of this that he was no longer properly working-class, yet nor had he assimilated into the middle class. Molina didn't “become” something other than what he was but, also, at the same time, because he left his working-class origins behind, he was never who he was. He was a ghost.

In interviews, Molina was candid about his depression, describing his songwriting as “a language he had to make in order to deal with the world.”³⁴ This is the same sorrow that marks *Wanda*: the bleakness of the landscape and the flatness of the characters, the lack of lightness, down to the actual graininess of the film. In other words, it isn’t that where Molina, Linkous, and Loden come from is dark and that their sorrow is a result of this darkness. Instead, their melancholia derives from the loss of having left the place that formed them.

The world we leave behind continues. The communal sense inherent in living in the community we were once part of is gone. And it is the lack that occurs in the void where our lives would have been had we remained, that lives on inside our lost loved object. After leaving our working-class origins, even if we do return, the initial rupture of having left leaves a fissure, a wound that cannot be healed.

Who would I be had I not left? A waitress, a maid, I imagine, or a receptionist — jobs I held before I left for college. I left because I wanted something different for myself — something no one in my extended family knew of — though I had no inkling what that something different was, or what I would become, as a result of leaving.

Mark Linkous became a musician, in part, as a means of transcending a life of working in the mines, and fled his home as soon as he was able to, in order to pursue this dream. In the end, he wound up lost, broke, and addicted to drugs. When he finally returned to the South, he gave up on trying to “make it” as a musician. But it was this, his return to the South and his giving up, that allowed him to finally make the beautiful, melancholic music he made as Sparklehorse. That he had nothing to lose allowed him to risk everything, which meant making music grounded entirely in his own lived experience without worrying whether anyone else out in the world would like it.

In Linkous's writing he includes the rural landscape of Dickinson County, his home, its objects (woods, animals, and rivers), and its language, as well as references to coal mining origins. He does this implicitly by dirtying up his songs with noise, as we have seen, but also more explicitly too. For example, in his song "More Yellow Birds," he references a coal mining disaster, but this can also be read as a metaphor for his disastrous foray into New York and Los Angeles:

And the Captain Howdy lit upon my shoulder
And he left me with sulfur and rooms full of headaches
I fell in with snakes in the poisoned ranks of strangers
Please send me more yellow birds for the dim interior

Indeed, the "dim interior" can be read as both the deadly mines and Linkous's own dark interior, his melancholia.

The melancholia of class is twofold. Neither Chan Marshall, Jason Molina, nor Mark Linkous remained where they grew up. And yet leaving and living elsewhere meant they would never feel at home in the world, and that their home — the place, its people, the past, what formed them — would always haunt them. Away from their origins, in a world of flatness and superficiality, they lost themselves. Linkous became homeless and a heroin addict, Cat Power ended up making slick music, unrecognizable from her earlier folk and blues inspired songs, and Molina spent his final years shuttling away from both his working-class home and the music world, drinking himself to death.

The antidote for losing one's self is turning back toward where one comes from. In interviews Loden said she was only able to find out who she was when she made *Wanda*, and Linkous, once he left Los Angeles for good, was able to get clean, make five albums, engage in a number of musical collaborations, as well as serve as the producer of other artists' albums. By leaving their origins, their origins became evident to them.

Then, when they returned “home” by making artwork about their working-class origins, this artwork became a symbolic language for what they lost. This doesn’t return the lost loved object to them; it will always remain missing. But it does situate the artist; it returns them, symbolically, to their working-class origins.

Leaving our working-class origins changes us in a myriad of ways, many of which we will remain unaware of, and therefore be unable to change. Ways of talking and dressing, cultural references, and, most profoundly, our way of thinking will be marked by the neoliberal world we find ourselves in. If we do return home, we won’t be the same. We will be forever changed. Furthermore, when we do leave our working-class origins, shame is interpolated onto us by those around us. This shame becomes internalized, an integral part of who we are. Linkous often described how he had fainted on a number of occasions when standing before a large crowd. The musician Angela Faye Martin, who worked with Linkous, said he “avoided parties and never wanted to be around more than four people at a time.”³⁵ In interviews, Linkous is described as polite, incredibly shy, and soft spoken. Explaining why he moved to an old farmhouse in Virginia, he said he wanted to be someplace where no one could hear him. Not even his wife, as he explained in one interview.

One way to return to one’s lost self is to literally return home, as Linkous did, or to make art out of that place, as Molina, Linkous, and Loden did. Another way is to collect artifacts that represent where one comes from. Like Jason Molina, Mark Linkous was also a collector of old objects. In particular, he was a collector of what he described as organic or tactile objects, usually old and ruined musical instruments or recording devices he’d find at flea markets or landfills. These items ranged from old guitars to old music boxes he played by hand. He also collected vintage motorcycles (reminiscent of his childhood motocross and motorcycle bikes).

Just as importantly, he collected objects he then placed in his writing: horses, cars, motorcycles, and ghosts. He was known, too, to stop at abandoned houses while on motorcycle trips with friends to explore the ruins. This sense of digging up one's origins is at once metaphorical and literal. In *Sparklehorse=Mark Linkous=Southern Man*, as Linkous shows the filmmaker his motorcycles and automobiles in the front yard of his farmhouse, he says, "The bikes and the car, the charger, there's just something organic, tactile, (thing) about them." This "organic, tactile" quality has to do with the materiality of the objects, which serve as anchors to his world, his origins. The importance of including these objects in his writing cannot be overstated — they are a means with which to tether him to his origins. Similarly, Linkous surrounded himself with the work of other Southern writers he admired by including references to their work in his songs, and in this way made a kind of home around him.

You see this inclusion of objects or references to home in the work of other working-class writers. For example, cars appear repeatedly in the stories of Breece D'J Pancake, as do engines and gas stations. Pancake, a West Virginia writer who left his home to attend the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, belonged in neither world: not in the world he grew up in and not in the privileged Southern society of Charlottesville. The theme of leaving, of moving to the city, appears throughout the stories in his one collection: those who leave are seen as sellouts, are guilty of spreading the "virus" of false hope among those who remain in the community. False hope that leads, as Pancake writes in his story "The Trilobites," to suicides. Though Pancake left his home, the main character in the story never leaves.

After leaving West Virginia, Pancake attended undergraduate and then graduate school. Though he was making his way up in the literary world, Pancake was self-conscious of his social class, remarking upon his "hillbilly" status among the middle-class people he found himself surrounded by. In *A Room Forever: The Life, Work, and Letters of Breece*

D’J Pancake, Thomas E. Douglass writes, “According to Chuck Perdue, Pancake was thought of as ‘some sort of Appalachian primitive.’”³⁶ Furthermore, when he arrived at college, he’d already held a number of jobs, but discovered his classmates had never. He also couldn’t understand the values, or what he perceived as lack of values, of his classmates. Though he left his home, it never stopped haunting him. In his writings and in his letters home, he wrote of West Virginia, the theme of leaving Appalachia for university and the impossible drive to return to where one comes from. Like so many other working-class artists who leave their origins, Pancake took his own life, killing himself when he was twenty-six years old.

Linkous included Pancake as one of his favorite writers, among other Southerners. A voracious reader, Linkous said, “I’m probably more influenced by Southern literature than from listening to other music.”³⁷ And when asked in *Sparklehorse=Mark Linkous=Southern Man* “Can you explain to me what is the South?” Linkous deferred, saying that writers such as Pancake, Pickney Benedict, and Cormac McCarthy would be more able to answer the question. In particular, Linkous was a fan of McCarthy’s early trilogy (*Suttree*, *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*), which takes place in Tennessee and in an unknown location in Appalachia. Throughout the documentary, Linkous’s wife Teresa reads sections from *Suttree*:

Countrymen come for miles with the earth clinging to their shoes and sit all day like mutes in the marketplace. This city constructed on no known paradigm, a mongrel architecture reading back through the works of man in a brief delineation of the aberrant disordered and mad.³⁸

Linkous was also a fan of the poet Frank Stanford’s work. References to Stanford’s poetry appear throughout Linkous’s writing. In fact, Linkous attributed three lines from his song “Saint Mary” to Stanford:

The only things
I really need
Is water, a gun, and rabbits.

Like Linkous, Molina, Loden, and Pancake, Stanford's work is deeply marked by place: the river, life, and poverty along the levee. Some critics have claimed his references originate solely from his imagination. They argue that Stanford, adopted and raised by a wealthy man, did not grow up in poverty. I don't dispute this — it is my belief that once we leave the place of our origins, we then carry that place within our mind where it changes over the years as our imagination (mis)remembers it. But the places Stanford's work draws upon are his origins before he was adopted, when he was an orphan. This before-place collapses and folds into the summers he spent with his adopted parents along the levee, among the poor, itinerant workers, among those he intuitively felt a kinship with. These, in other words, were Stanford's people; they represented his lost origins. Similarly, throughout his work, Linkous refers to the world of his childhood in southwest Virginia, its mountains and hollows. For instance, in "Mountains," included on the album *Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain*, he writes:

Cheer up my brother
It's going to be alright
I know your hearts are heavy as mountains
But we're going to go back home one day

Like Linkous and Pancake, Stanford's work is filled with the objects of place, of his place of origin. Here are the opening two stanzas of his poem "Knew It Was Love, Felt It Was Glory, After Pier Paolo Pasolini" (Pasolini is, of course, also a working-class artist/writer)

Here is where we went out in the boats, listening
For the dogs and children, for the girl laughing
When she lifts her dress, for the open casket,
Strolling through the wet libraries of moonlight

You could smell horses, some kind of flowers.

Of his return to Virginia, Linkous said, “When I was a kid, all I wanted to do was escape. But in moving back here, I’ve since come to appreciate different things, like the holes and rests in our music.”³⁹ These “holes and rests” allow for silences, making spaces for what cannot be said, for the unknowable, irretrievable essence of what was lost when we left — what can never be found.

When he came back from being away, Linkous moved first to Richmond, and then to Enon, before he moved out to rural Virginia, three hours away from Richmond. Eventually, he moved to a mountaintop in North Carolina. Though none of these “returns” are literal returns to his home, each of them are moves away from the city, where he created a life outside of the world. In his song “Return to Me,” from his album *Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain*, he seems to speak to this idea, but in this case, he is beckoning his home back to him, in a love song written to his childhood past:

Arise oh brother mountain
Our hooves hammering your coils
The rivers carve out your hollows
With tears from me
Return to me
Return to me my love
Oh my love

Here, he recreates his home, his origins, anew, in the dream of a mountain where he will live forever in the past that has been lost. And indeed, Linkous did live for a number of years on a mountaintop in North Carolina, away from people, with horses, in the forest, among bears, dogs, and rivers. Describing his home in North Carolina, he said, “And I ended up by this creek, and I could smell the water and earth, and it rained almost every day in this little valley [...] and I just decided that I’m going to stay here. And that’s where I am.”⁴⁰

In the end, regardless of what we do, the melancholia persists. It never goes away. In 2010, separated from his wife and having left the country to try to live in the city, he moved in with a bandmate in Knoxville. On March 6, Linkous walked out of the two-story house, stepped out into the alley and shot himself — the same way Frank Stanford had, the same way Breece Pancake had. That he took his life as soon as he moved back to the city is remarkably symbolic, as if he knew he would not survive it. But also, that he took his life in the same manner as both Stanford and Pancake, by a self-inflicted gunshot wound (Linkous is said to have shot himself in the heart, the same method as Stanford), suggests that Linkous may have unconsciously imagined a return home through death — to another, shared home.

Like Linkous, Pancake, and Stanford, Jason Molina also died very suddenly; the alcoholism that would kill him seemed to appear out of nowhere. He didn’t drink during high school or college and then, suddenly, he began drinking alcohol in deadly amounts. There came a point where the melancholia became too much and all the writing and collecting could no longer keep it at bay. Once he began, drinking alcohol became a necessity, something he needed as soon as he woke. This need quickly became all-consuming. Soon, Molina was unable to perform, let alone write songs, without the aid of alcohol. The last years of his life were spent in and out of rehabs and detoxes, in a number of near-death experiences.

That this shift occurred with such speed and with such violence makes Molina's alcoholism seem almost suicidal, a death wish; as if he were intentionally drinking himself to death. Freud describes this in his concept of the death drive and the pleasure principle. The pleasure principle's main job is to keep excitation down so we can function. This can be brought about by using alcohol or drugs, for example. The death drive is circuitous, an internal energy that drives the body both to a return to its origins and toward death. When in tremendous pain, the unconscious will propel us further, as if to drive us through, toward what feels like relief. This explains drug use, and especially in instances where though we've already reached a dangerous level, we continue to push through. There is a sense that if we can just make our way through, we will force an exit, allowing us to begin again. With Molina, both of these concepts make sense. All of this is unconscious, of course, but when we have nothing, we have nothing to lose, and it makes sense to want to push through the bottom of the bottom, as if on the other side there might exist a clean slate and the chance to begin again.

The last years of his life, no longer able to make music due to his impaired health, Molina sought help. He visited doctors, detoxes, and rehab centers. Like Linkous, whose accidental overdose resulted in a lifelong injury that would necessitate a wheelchair, then a cane, Molina's drinking similarly manifested in disability. The result of Molina's suicidal drinking was an inability to perform but also to write or play music, earn a living, live with others. In the end, Molina's friends and relatives were no longer able to converse with him and his cognitive skills showed evidence of atrophy. Like the objects he collected to take the place of his lost loved object, Molina's impairment similarly held the same space. The pain of destitution and physical collapse symbolized the void of this lost object. Through his daily, even moment by moment, tending to the wound of his

impairment, Molina could, through an act of transference, attend to the void of his lost working-class origins.

On 16 March, 2013, Molina was found dead in his apartment by a friend of his, a fifty-five-year-old man named John Pettijohn, who no one in Molina's family or circles of friends knew. Pettijohn lived in a homeless shelter in South Carolina and, he told authorities, was a friend of Molina's. He had spoken with Molina the day before. That during his last days, none of Molina's family or friends were in touch with him, and that his last conversation, presumably, was with another homeless man, who none of his friends or family knew, is reminiscent of Anthony's double in *The Souvenir*, the man Julie comes home to find in her apartment – a junkie, and presumably a friend of Anthony's. This man, a ghost of Anthony, who we never get to know, is akin to Molina's friend.

“No matter how far he'd come, or the extent to which he struggled, Jason Molina from Ohio remained proudly rooted in the trailer park shores of his childhood.”⁴¹ This deceptively simple statement is, in actuality, profound in that it returns us to our previous idea of doubling and ghosting, and the suggestion that, though Molina did literally leave “the trailer park shores of his childhood,” in a much deeper sense, he never did. When Jason Molina left Lorain, it isn't just the Jason Molina he left behind who became a ghost, haunting him. The Jason Molina who left Ohio also became a ghost.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE HAUNTING

We were scum, trash, refuse that didn't fit into the system.

— *High Life*

We cannot fall out of this world.

— Christian Dietrich Grabbe, cited by Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*

Filled with the death drive, trapped in the realm between two deaths, the working-class subject is a specter, undead, haunting. The death drive drives the working-class subject further and further into death, which is also the origin. The death drive is moving toward a new beginning, while at the same time pushing us in the direction of death. Melancholia, too, is an unconscious desire to return to our origins, while simultaneously also a revulsion, a parallel desire to stay away. We are without a home in the world and we are without a home in our psyche and body. A ghost within a ghost, dead but still living.

In *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*, the historian Jefferson Cowie chronicles the demise of the American working class. Cowie follows Dewey Burton, a twenty-six-year-old worker in the Ford plant outside Detroit, a New Deal Democrat who was interviewed a number of times by the *New York Times*. A life-long Democrat, Burton, ambitious and smart, was unhappy with the monotony of his factory work. While working at his full-time job at the plant, he tried to start his own custom car painting business and began working away at a college degree. But, by the mid-1970s, Burton gave in: “It takes so much to just make it that there’s no time for dreams and no energy for making them come true —

and I'm not so sure anymore that it's ever going to get better.”¹ As Cowie writes, “The period has been named ‘pivotal’ not because of its monumental events, its great leaders, or its movements, but because society, from its economic foundations to its cultural manifestations, really did move in a new direction.”²

The ideology of neoliberalism, like all hegemonic ideologies, appears non-existent precisely because its absorption into society and our conformism to its mandates is so complete. Ushering in neoliberalism through the loosening of regulations and the cutting of social programs, both Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher began a process of denigrating the working class. Despite the widening economic chasm that occurred as a direct result of it, with its ideology of meritocracy, neoliberalism, at the same time, attempts to erase the concept of social class from discourse. If we fail to succeed in neoliberalism's manic and endless competition by being poor, becoming impaired, or mentally ill, neoliberalism insists, we only have ourselves to blame.

What put the nail in the coffin, the thing that made worse what was already worse, was the moment when liberal politicians readily accepted neoliberalism. Whereas the Democratic Party in the US, and the Labour Party in the UK had previously been parties for the working class, with the advent of neoliberalism in the 1970s and 1980s both parties abandoned the working class, turning instead to the elite. What we have now, in the United States for example, are two main political parties, both of which fight on behalf of corporations, the middle class, and the elite. The moment of this acquiescence occurred during Tony Blair and Bill Clinton's political rule, who both conformed themselves and their political parties to ideals that had been heretofore regarded primarily as held by right-wing, conservative parties. As seen in 1996, when Clinton developed his welfare reform program and in 1998 when, under Tony Blair, the Private Financial Initiative, originally developed by the Conservative Party, was embraced

and further expanded. The current conceit that there are no social classes in the US and elsewhere can be traced directly to both the advent of neoliberalism and to the complete absorption of neoliberal ideology by the American middle class.

During the 1970s, workers' earnings began to slide, followed by mass layoffs, plant closures, and the slow destruction of unions. As Mark Fisher writes in *Ghosts of My Life*, "The 70s is the time before the switch, a time at once kinder and harsher than now."³ In a 1974 interview for the *New York Times*, Dewey Burton explained:

Something's happening to people like me — working stiff, as they say — and it isn't just that we have to pay more for this or that or that we're having to do without this or make do with a little less of that. It's deep, and hard to explain, but it's more like more and more of us are sort of leaving all our hopes outside in the rain and coming into the house and just locking the door — you know, just turning the key and "click", that's it for what we always thought we could be.⁴

Unable or unwilling to assimilate into a culture that prizes material accumulation and self-valorization above all else, the working class have no place to turn; phenomenologically speaking, there is no space for the working class in the neoliberal world. As a result, the working-class artist can self-destruct, either through drugs or alcohol, like Jason Molina or, less indirectly, through suicide, like Mark Linkous or Breece D'J Pancake. And through these methods, she can make a space in which she can exit the world and live. Any type of escape from one's reality suggests the creation of a third space, a phenomenological space within which to exist, even if only momentarily, even if it leads to death. For the working class, who cannot find a space to live in neoliberal society, all roads lead to the death drive. "Rather be *inside and forget it*, that's the position of the death drive," writes Lyotard.⁵

In Irvine Welsh's novel *Trainspotting*, his working-class characters refuse to assimilate into a culture they see as superficial, a world in which success is defined by the accumulation of material objects and aspiration, which is hinged, for the working class, to a psychic death. In the novel, Welsh's character, Renton, says:

Choose life Choose mortgage payments; choose washing machines; choose cars; choose sitting oan a couch watching mind-numbing and spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fuckin junk food intae yir mooth. Choose rotting away. [...] Choose life. Well, ah choose no tae choose life. ⁶

This act of refusal may appear on the surface to be passive, an irrational act of self-destruction. But it is instead an act of resistance akin to Antigone's vehement "No." Indeed, for the working class, with no choice but either to assimilate and be annihilated or to say no to assimilation and be marginalized from society, the next best thing is to press your foot on the gas, and to go faster. This resistance to neoliberalism appears to the middle class as self-destructive and evidence of stupidity. And yet, as Žižek writes:

the margin of my freedom is that I can say No! to any positive element that I encounter. This negativity of freedom provides the zero-level from which every positive content can be questioned. Lacan's position is thus that being exposed/overwhelmed, caught in a cobweb of preexisting conditions, is *not* incompatible with radical autonomy. Of course, I cannot undo the substantial weight of the context into which I am thrown; of course, I cannot penetrate the opaque background of my being; but what I can do is, in an act of negativity, "cleanse the plate," draw a line, exempt myself, step out of the symbolic in a "suicidal" gesture of a radical act—what Freud called "death drive" and what German Idealism called 'radical negativity.'⁷

Such acts of resistance, acts that may appear as instances of passivity, are instead attempts at navigating an impossible situation where acquiescence means self-erasure and the act of turning away and inward (*vis a vis* shutting the door to the outside world) is the one form of resistance available.

Like Antigone, Welsh's Renton offers no explanation or context to explain his seemingly self-destructive acts, nor does he attempt in any way to excuse himself. As a result, his behavior appears irrational. In addition, by not providing context, his acts of refusal create an additional layer of incomprehensibility. And yet, this threshold of silence and incomprehensibility makes a space between Renton and his culture, just as his acts of "No" — his drug use, for example — make a space between what his culture is offering and that which he actually wants: Nothing (not what his culture is offering). This nothing becomes a kind of placeholder in which what he wants (nothing; not what his culture is offering) resides. This space is akin to what Herbert Marcuse terms "inner freedom" in *One-Dimensional Man*: "The idea of 'inner freedom' here has its reality: it designates the private space in which man may become and remain "himself."⁸

Those who are unable or unwilling to conform to neoliberal culture and its ideology find themselves cast off, living at the margins: institutionalized, in poverty, or labeled "insane." To be "marginalized" means literally to be "forced into a position of powerlessness," which is to say forced into a position where one has no space, neither internal (mental space) nor external (living within an institution, housing projects, or other substandard housing). To have the ability to spend time, leisurely, either in one's mind (daydreaming), or moving through space (traveling outside one's town, for example, or, in some cases, simply outside one's neighborhood) is the exclusive privilege of those with access to financial capital. Those who are

marginalized are excluded from these privileges. With no home, without agency, where then does one who is marginalized go?

In his essay “Nihil Rebound: Joy Division,” Mark Fisher writes:

Turn on your TV.

Turn down your pulse.

Turn away from it all.

It’s all getting

Too much.⁹

Faced with the realization that one has no “space,” one option is to create another, alternative space, within which to live. One obvious means of doing so is through the use of alcohol and drugs, which create, depending on the type, either a psychic expansion or a dimming down of the mind. In either case, alcohol and drugs can create an interior space within which one can think, daydream, or otherwise escape the incessant desires of the outside world. Freud, in *Civilization and its Discontents*, remarks upon this form of escape and the possibility of creating an alternative world, “one can try to re-create the world, to build up in its stead another world in which its most unbearable features are eliminated and replaced by others that are in conformity with one’s own wishes.”¹⁰

Another means through which one might create an alternative space is through nomadism: moving from place to place with no fixed determination in mind. One such example is traveling illegally by freight train. Or, if one is fortunate to have access to an automobile or motorcycle, one might drive for hours in an attempt to create a sense of agency through this forward momentum. The movement forward I am referring to does not necessarily

result in a quantifiable record of progress. The body is moving through space but it returns back to the same place it began. This type of self-propulsion might be called a stagnant propulsion. But even if such movement is static, providing no discernible movement forward, it still provides a form of agency for those who find themselves trapped in a static state of marginalization.

Claire Denis's film *High Life* is ostensibly about a group of what appear to be members of the working class who find themselves alienated from society, resulting in their incarceration. Given the choice between a life on death row or to participate in a space voyage, they choose the latter. The film is about mass incarceration, the prison industrial complex, forced sterilization, and fertility. In an interview for *Cinemascope*, Denis describes the film in precisely these terms:

Denis: It's a jail movie, for sure.

Scope: Except that unlike most prison movies, there's no chance of a jailbreak because you can't exactly break out of jail in outer space.

Denis: By dying, they can.^{[11](#)}

It is also about the virus of violence (which originates in a culture where power uses violence over those without agency), how it haunts us, following us wherever we go. But, perhaps more than anything, *High Life* is a film about what a culture does with those who cannot or will not conform to its ideologies. Monte, the film's main character, describes himself and the other "inmates" by stating, "We were scum, trash, refuse that didn't fit into the system." Denis doesn't spend time showing the before lives of the characters — their childhoods, for example, their poverty and struggles, their experiences of exclusion — instead, what we see are the results. In this way Denis is showing us the characters the way the world sees them:

without explanation or context, not as humans with lives and experiences but as criminals. In her portrayal, the filmmaker is showing us the Real (“Real,” because the poor and working class, having experienced social death, have been removed from the symbolic order) — as Clarice Lispector’s later writing (which we will discuss later), for example, attempts to do.

During the course of the film, which is shot in an oversaturated hue, there are a few short splices at the onset, depicting the prisoners’ lives before entering space. These intervals are filmed in a greyish hue and occur on a train on which two of the inmates are traveling. In the abbreviated scene, the two central male characters appear on the roof of the moving train, their bodies sprawled leisurely, touching. Their intimacy occurs as the result of their shared precarity; that the two are alone in a world that does not want them. Though *Denis* includes only a few short moments of trains moving and the peripatetic characters in their previous life, the clips are nonetheless extraordinarily enigmatic. Indeed, the images inform the film in much the same way as the images of Earth follow the voyagers on their ship, as Monte explains to his infant daughter. At the beginning of the film, regarding the random clips of footage of sex and violence that appear on the screen in their room, Monte tells his daughter, “These images of Earth are following after us like viruses, like parasites.” Like a virus, our origins haunt us, informing all aspects of our lives.

We understand that the marginalized characters in *High Life* are on the move — escaping from one place in pursuit of another. We know they have no home, so we know there is no point A or point B. It is inferred that the men and women used drugs to escape their bleak realities and stole for survival. We understand, then, that the boys in the earlier scene are moving their bodies through space in an attempt to outrun the endlessness of their despair. Though we don’t learn the backgrounds of the boys, we do learn of Monte’s background, when he explains, “I was raised by my dog”: he was

an orphan, either literally or metaphorically. We know, too, that he spent his boyhood in juvenile hall and then was sent on to prison. We can only surmise the same or similar stories for the other inmates. This brief scene on the roof of the moving train illustrates the possibility of a third space: the boys are not in any place — they are traveling on a train, moving. In this way they are able to escape the rules and ideologies of society. At the same time, they are able to preserve themselves. The forward momentum resulting from their movement through space offers a sense of agency, a welcome respite from their relentless despair.

High Life takes place inside a shipping container-like spacecraft that Monte describes as being akin to a prison. He says, “This reminds me of juvi, reminds me of jail.” Everyone on board, aside from the captain, Chandra, and the doctor, Dr Dibs, are former death row inmates. The ship is essentially a floating prison: the inmates are controlled by substances pumped into the air, are strapped down in their beds at night, and subject to mandatory fertility experiments. And, unfortunately for the inmates, though they’ve finally left Earth, the virus of violence has been brought on board with them. As Monte says, “These images of Earth follow us like viruses, like parasites.” We understand this statement to be both literal (images from Earth are transported to screens on the ship), but also metaphorical (though they have left Earth, with its injustices, hierarchies, and violence, the ship is contaminated with it in the form of Dr Dibs). We learn that Dibs has killed her own two children and husband. Though her crimes are graver than the inmates who are deemed by society to be the true criminals, she is, nonetheless, put in charge of the ship. Part of the structure of power, she wields absolute control over them. She tells them, at one point in the film, “You’re a bunch of criminals and petty thieves.” The point here being that those in power engage in criminal acts that are simply part of wielding power, while those deemed “criminals” engage in acts of crime in order to survive.

The term “taboo” is introduced at the start of the film in a scene in which Monte is talking to his baby daughter, Willow, explaining what a “taboo” is. The film ends with Willow and Monte facing a taboo: the two find themselves inside the spaceship alone, after everyone else aboard the ship has died. In one scene, Monte wakes to Willow, now a teenager, in his arms. She has been sleeping with him since she was a baby and doesn’t know continuing to do so is a taboo. There is a sense that if the two remain alone on the ship much longer, they will break the unstated taboo. The film is framed by the word; introduced at the start, it does not return again until the end. Though in both cases the word refers directly to the relationship between Monte and Willow, its significance does not end there. As Alenka Zupančič writes in *What is Sex*: “In any social conflict, a ‘neutral’ position is always and necessarily the position of the ruling class: it seems ‘neutral’ because it has achieved the status of dominant ideology, which always strikes us as self-evident.”¹² A “taboo,” then, is any action that falls counter to the “neutral” social position. In the case of *High Life*, the inmates are members of the working class and are thus those who cannot fit into neoliberal society and culture. In other words, the very lives of Monte and his fellow inmates are, by definition, “taboo.” *They* are taboo. Their very existence is prohibited.

In the final scene, Monte and his daughter venture into a black hole. There is no conversation about suicide and yet, their mission can only be described as a suicide mission. The two appear to pursue this self-annihilating quest without much consideration. There is a sense of relief and resignation in the act. Deciding to engage in the mission, the two sit side-by-side, inside the tiny shuttle, as they shoot through black space into what we know they know is the firewall that will annihilate them both.

The entire film can be seen as an enactment of the death drive: a voyage toward death that is also, at the same time, a journey to the inmates’ origins: they enrolled in the program believing that when they were returned to

Earth, they would be free. A *tabula rasa*, a new beginning through this movement toward death. And the final scene is the perfect performance of the death drive. It provides a sense of agency and a space within which to exist, even if only temporarily, and even if, in the end, it kills them both. The death drive is circuitous, and is always en route to its origins and toward death. It wants, more than anything, to destroy everything in order to begin again. As Lyotard writes in *Libidinal Economy*, “death as deliverance, the transfer of true life to an elsewhere.”^{[13](#)}

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE DEATH DRIVE

Origin is the goal.

— Karl Kraus

The liminal space between two deaths is both where the undead live and where the death drive abounds. The death drive is circuitous, a maddening energy that does not stop. It overlaps itself, repeating into infinity. When Benjamin writes in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that the revolutionary must loop back into history en route to the present, “the tiger’s leap into the past,” he may as well be describing the death drive. Similarly, when he includes the Karl Kraus citation “Origin is the goal” (“*Ursprung ist das Ziel*”) in the same thesis, Thesis XIV, here, too, he could be motioning toward the drive.

The original German word Benjamin uses, “*Ursprung*,” consists of the prefix “*Ur*,” which means “out of,” and the word “*Sprung*,” which translates to “a well,” and means to “spring” or “jump,” and to “rise up” or “spring up.” This word, then, “origin,” means both to “leap out of” and “spring up out of.” The latter definition correlates directly to Benjamin’s idea of leaping into the past. Benjamin’s concept of “the tiger’s leap into the past” and the death drive are not the same, of course. Benjamin’s concept is a means to redeem the past, the haunting specters, while the death drive occurs in the interior. And yet the structure of this circuitous move back through the origin en route to the present is similar.

Under all of its circuitry, the death drive’s main aim is its origins (along with its end). It clears the deck, begins anew, by returning to the beginning and destroying the now. In these later writings she critiques her earlier

work, work she considered, in retrospect, less important, more decorative and aesthetic. In her later work Lispector created an entirely new process and form of writing, one centered on poverty and the abject. Through this radical departure, Lispector destroyed her earlier self and the works she made, making space for her true self, one tethered to her girlhood self, a girlhood lived in abjection and poverty.

In an interview with Jùlio Lerner for TV Cultura, Clarice Lispector described her final writing project, the novella *The Hour of the Star*, as “the story of a girl who was so poor that all she ate was hot dogs.”¹ “That’s not the story, though,” she continued, “The story is about a crushed innocence, an ‘anonymous misery.’”² This idea of a “crushed innocence, “an anonymous misery” is the axis upon which all of Lispector’s work revolves. Lispector, a Jewish Ukrainian, was forced to flee with her family. They migrated to Brazil where they lived in Recife in the northeast. In Recife, Lispector’s mother died when she was nine and her father struggled to find a means to support the family. In the same TV interview, Lispector is asked, “Clarice, what did your father do professionally?” This is a common question used to determine one’s social class. Lispector’s face in the frame during the interview appears sad: her eyes, turned away, her mouth half-open. The question is a form of wounding: you can answer and remain fixed in your social class or you can lie or, of course, you can answer obliquely. Lispector tells the truth. She responds, “A sales representative, things like that.”³ Indeed, Lispector was intimate with precarity. In her preface to *The Hour of the Star* she wrote, “I dedicate it [this book] to the memory of my former poverty, when everything was more sober and dignified and I had never eaten lobster.”⁴

“My truest life is unrecognizable,” Lispector writes in *The Hour of the Star*, “extremely interior and there is not a single word that defines it.”⁵ This sentiment, of being inexplicable to others, speaks directly to Lispector’s own experience. Though the child of immigrants raised in

poverty, when Lispector became a recognized writer, she appeared to the Brazilian middle class as a member of their class. And yet, at the same time, she appeared mysterious, an enigma. This seeming strangeness is due to the middle class's blindness to the working class. They are unable to comprehend Lispector because they are unable to see beyond the confines of their own social class. Like Barbara Loden, who appears incomprehensible to middle-class women, Lispector, excised from her social class, with her melancholia, her alienation from middle-class society, and her removal from the literary world, appears incomprehensible, too.

By marrying her law school classmate, Maury Gargel Valente, who, upon graduation, became a diplomat, Lispector moved from the working class to the middle class. Lispector never abandoned her origins, though, continuing to write about the poor and marginalized up until *The Hour of the Star*, written as she was dying. Her childhood always remained intact and within her. In "O manifesto da cidead," she writes, "That is the river. That is the clock. It is Recife... I see it more clearly now: that is the house, my house. the bridge, the river, the prison, the square blocks of buildings, the stairway, where I no longer stand." ⁶ Like Macabéa, the female protagonist of *The Hour of the Star*, who, Lispector writes, "always noticed small and insignificant things," ⁷ Lispector remained similarly acutely aware of the world, seeing everything. As she writes in "Literature and Justice," "Ever since I have come to know myself, the social problem has been more important to me than any other issue: in Recife the black shanty towns were the first truth I encountered." ⁸ This contradiction, that of living as a member of the middle class while identifying with her precarious childhood, resulted in alienation, in melancholia. When she moved to Rio, she left the place that had formed her. This loss resulted in a wound, in a void that could not be filled in with anything. As an adult, Lispector suffered from melancholia, a condition that worsened as the years passed. In Switzerland, where she was stationed with her husband, she saw a psychoanalyst who prescribed

pills to alleviate her depression. But because her depression was a symptom of her melancholia, the external manifestation of it, the pills were unable to alleviate it. Surrounded by people who could not see her, people who she felt separate from, Lispector retreated further into her interior world.

“Yes,” she writes in *The Hour of the Star*, “I have no social class, marginalized as I am. Yes, the upper class considers me a weird monster, the middle class worries I might unsettle them, the lower class never comes to me.”⁹ The term “monster” and “monstrous” appear repeatedly throughout Lispector’s work. She felt herself a monster or, rather, she felt herself seen by others as a monster. For example, in *The Hour of the Star*, she asks, “Who hasn’t ever wondered: am I a monster or is this what it means to be a person?”¹⁰ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a monster is “a mythical creature which is part animal and part human, or combines elements of two or more animal forms, and is frequently of great size and ferocious appearance. Later, more generally: any imaginary creature that is large, ugly, and frightening.”¹¹ A monster, then, might be a working-class Jewish woman from northern Brazil who passes as a middle-class member of the Brazilian bourgeoisie: one part intellectual, one part peasant, one part worker, and one part diplomat’s wife.

As an “anonymous” northeasterner, Lispector was “monstrous” in the eyes of the middle class. Then, later, when she was seen as a member of the middle class, she was seen as a “sacred monster.” In *Esçobo*, she writes: “One of the things that makes me unhappy is this story of the sacred monster: others fear me for no reason, and I end up fearing myself.”¹² Here, Lispector articulates how we are trained, through the constant interpolation of shame connected to our social class, to despise ourselves.

Abandoning our class background is always an option. We see this possibility in *The Hour of the Star*, specifically, in Lispector’s creation of Olímpico, Macabéa’s boyfriend, and Glória, her best friend. When Macabéa meets Olímpico, she immediately recognizes herself in him. But he has

internalized the society's beliefs and values, their sense of entitlement, cruelty, and their hatred of the working class and the poor. "Olímpico de Jesus," Lispector writes, "worked in a metals factory and she [Macabéa] didn't even notice he didn't call himself a 'worker' but a 'metallurgist.'" ¹³ He has internalized self-consciousness, something Macabéa does not have. Unlike her, he is aware of the systems of hierarchy, his place in them, and the skills necessary to propel himself out from his class. "He [Olímpico] was more susceptible to survive than Macabéa because it wasn't by chance that he had killed a man, a rival of his, in the back of beyond, the long jackknife entering softly softly the backwoodsman's liver. He had kept this crime an absolute secret, which gave him the power a secret gives." ¹⁴ Macabéa falls in love with Olímpico because she sees herself in him: he is also precarious, a laborer. But Olímpico sees his own lower class standing in her and, as a result, despises her for it. Indeed, as Lispector writes, "Having killed and stealing made him more than a random occurrence, they gave him some class, they made him a man whose honor had been defended." ¹⁵ Olímpico leaves Macabéa for her best friend, Glória, because doing so helps him move out of his class: "But when he [Olímpico] saw Glória, Macabéa's co-worker, he immediately realized she had class." ¹⁶ As Lispector continues:

The fact that she was a carioca made her belong to the longed-for clan from the South. Seeing her, he immediately guessed that, though ugly, Gloria was well fed. And that made her quality goods. ¹⁷

His cruelty represents the violence that is inherent in a class-based society. To absorb the capitalist culture's beliefs and values is to become complicit in it. In the case of Olímpico, this means seeing one's self and others as mere objects, and seeing relationships solely for their transactional aspect. This is precisely what Olímpico does. In fact, though Macabéa is surrounded by people of her own class (Olímpico, Glória, and the psychic),

each of them has absorbed the beliefs of society: that people are to be utilized as means to move one's self forward. This self-erasure and the erasure of other working-class people to make money and acquire more capital is the result of capitalism. Because Macabéa has nothing they can extract, Olímpico and Glória ignore her. They are like the doctor Macabéa visits, "This doctor had no point whatsoever. Medicine was just to make money and never for love of his profession or of the sick."¹⁸ He saw his patients as rejects of society, like himself. "He knew," Lispector writes, "he was out-of-date with medicine and clinical novelties but it was good enough for poor people. His dream was to have money to do exactly what he wanted: nothing."¹⁹

Macabéa, on the other hand, does not engage in transactional relationships, does not objectify herself or others. Indeed, she is unaware (until she meets the psychic) of her own class standing. It is precisely this aspect of her that makes her appear idiotic to others, as Rodrigo, the male narrator, explains, "She had never figured out how to figure things out."²⁰ She didn't know how the structures of power worked or how she might manipulate or use other people to gain access to this power. This "not knowing" is considered by others to be evidence of her "idiocy."

Similarly, Macabéa is curious. She asks questions. This is not the case with her boyfriend or her co-worker, or others of her class who, instead of looking at the world and asking questions about it, expend all their energy trying to propel themselves up the class ladder. Indeed, what Macabéa is criticized for is not her philosophical inquiries, her curiosity regarding why things are the way they are but, rather, her ignorance regarding how to use others. In fact, the entire book is described by Lispector as a question: "I swear this book is made without words. It is a mute photograph. This book is a silence. This book is a question."²¹

Lispector knew her audience was not the precarious, not the poor or working class. She knew the poor and working class wouldn't be reading

her novels: they were too busy trying to survive, as she writes in *The Hour of the Star*, “If he’s poor, he won’t be reading me because reading me is superfluous for anyone who has a slight permanent hunger.”²²

Not being seen — either because one is a member of the precarious class and invisible to the middle class, or because one is from the precarious class but now existing in the middle class (one’s precarious class being ignored) — directly parallels Lispector’s concept of “an anonymous misery.” In both cases, the working class are not seen, or are seen but not recognized. Repeatedly, Lispector writes about how the middle class don’t see the working class and the poor. In *The Hour of the Star*, she writes of Macabéa’s invisibility to the world: “Nobody,” she writes, “looked at her on the street, she was cold coffee.”²³ And, again, in the same book, she writes, “The person I am going to talk about is so dumb that she sometimes smiles at other people on the street. Nobody smiles back because they don’t even look at her.”²⁴ In her novel *The Passion of GH*, GH, a member of the middle class, enters the private space of her maid, and is struck with the existential terror of having to see the reality of it, and the working class and poor’s daily existence: “And in that world that I was coming to know, there are several ways that mean seeing: one a looking at the other without seeing him, one possessing the other, one eating the other, one just being in a place and the other being there too: all that also means seeing.”²⁵

In “A Passion for the Void,” Colm Tóibín’s preface to *The Hour of the Star*, he quotes Elizabeth Bishop’s description of Lispector: “she’s the most non-literary writer I’ve ever known, and ‘never cracks a book’ as we used to say. She’s never read anything that I can discover — I think she’s a ‘self-taught’ writer, like a primitive painter.”²⁶ In this, Bishop makes transparent her own class bias. Not only did Lispector remark on the influence of other writers on her work, her writing makes apparent her affinity with a number of literary and philosophical texts. Furthermore, Bishop’s use of the terms “self-taught” and “primitive” are both derogatory terms used by the non-

working class to keep working-class artists and writers outside of the canon. Indeed, that Bishop, who translated Lispector's writing, is unable to see evidence of Lispector's reading of, among other writers, Kafka and Spinoza, demonstrates her own "non-literariness."

In Lispector's short story "Beauty and the Beast, or The Enormous Wound," she writes of Carla, a rich, selfish woman who is confronted with a wounded beggar on the street. Her response to the man is to cry out for help, not for him but for herself. During her entire interaction with the man, she remains unable to see him. Instead, she continues to use his existence as a form of measurement of herself and her own status. "She was," Lispector writes, "exposed to that man. She was completely exposed."²⁷ Not unlike Julie in *The Souvenir*, who became ill due to her proximity to Anthony, Carla, too, suffers deeply from her encounter with the poor. Like GH, who is similarly thrown into an existential crisis when confronted with the plight of her working-class maid and her own role in her precarity, Carla is similarly "exposed." "Exposed" both in the sense of seeing for the first time, having her previous pretenses removed, but also, "exposed" in the sense of her true self being exposed. The irony, of course, is that the beggar with the open wound on his leg, sitting on the side of the street, is the only one truly "exposed." He is vulnerable and in danger. And yet Carla remains unable to truly see the man. She can only see him through the lens of her own existence. "Her head," Lispector writes, "was full of parties, parties, parties. Celebrating what? Celebrating someone else's wound?"²⁸

The wound, here, is the beggar's. He is literally wounded. But he is also wounded by a life of poverty and the repetitive trauma that is such a life: the small daily quotidian moments of cruelty and violence, the everyday experiences that remain private. In the story, Carla can only see the man, his struggles, his wound, through the lens of her own life. As a result, she imagines herself wounded as the result of having to witness the man's suffering. Carla is self-conscious, which is to say, she is acutely aware of

her standing in the larger hierarchies of power. Aware of her privilege, she recognizes that her existence in the upper classes is her sole identity: “She had a name to uphold: it was Carla de Sousa e Santos. The ‘de’ and the ‘e’ were important: they denoted class and a four-hundred-year-old Rio family.”²⁹ To be aware of society’s hierarchies, its overarching hegemonic systems, and one’s fixed place in this larger system, to see others move freely within this system, utilizing the invisible power inherent in their class privilege, is to be cut, is to be wounded at every turn. Lispector was acutely aware of this wounding, and it is from this wound that she wrote. “I just can’t write. I just can’t write. With these words I’m scratching at a wound,” she writes in her short story “The Triumph.”³⁰

Addicted to cigarettes and the sleeping pills she’d been prescribed for her symptoms of depression, on 14 September, 1966 Lispector fell asleep with a cigarette in her hand, setting her bedroom on fire. After spending three days in the hospital, she survived the fire, but her body was left wounded with third-degree burns, rendering her writing hand lame. In his essay “Mother, Body, Writing: The Origins and Identity of Literature in Clarice Lispector,” Carlos Mendes de Sousa writes:

The distant yet present wound (excessive, obstinate, nightmarish) is the crossing of the dark desert where the self devours itself, consumes itself in its quest; it is a surrender to the realm of writing that is powerfully unleashed in an intense concentration of both the limited and the infinite. The overwhelming centrifugal violence that drags everything along with it, the ripping, the abysmal damage that attacked the physical body during the fire and submitted it to the full fury of the horrific, is equivalent to the painful labour that had always lingered within Lispector’s literary body, where invisible scars generated words.³¹

Not consciously, of course, but one might venture to say that, unconsciously, Lispector’s internal wound manifested in an external wound

in the impairment of her writing hand. Like Linkous and Molina, the unconscious, self-inflicted wound or impairment becomes a placeholder for the void of the lost loved object. Melancholia results, of course, in the inability to grieve. Through what Freud calls transference, the lost loved object manifests as a wound. And like anorexia or bulimia, alcohol or drug addictions — all resulting in impairment — the wound, then, like a phantom limb, takes the place of the missing object. Not actually, of course. Rather, akin to a fetish, by placing all of one's psychic energy into the impairment — tending to it, treating it — the actual lost loved object (one's working-class origins and home), though it continues to haunt, is subsumed by the conscious mind, momentarily at least.

In addition to chronicling the alienation of the marginalized in Brazilian culture, Lispector's work also performs the sense of existing between two worlds. Always aware of this rupture, her writing performs this dialectic. As Carlos Mendes de Sousa writes in "Mother, Body, Writing," "Situating itself in a border zone, Clarice's literature implies the exclusion of any type of hierarchalization and proposes the establishment of a nomadic space: a being not from any one place, but rather existing in an infinite gravitation which is all places."³²

Indeed, Macabéa, the main character of *The Hour of the Star*, a precarious woman drawn loosely from Lispector's own life, is described as: "She was subterranean and had never flowered. I'm lying: she was grass."³³ And, later, near the novella's ending, "For that puny creature named Macabéa great nature showed itself in the form of grass in the sewer..."³⁴ At the end of the text, as she lies on the concrete ground nearing her death, in a scene uncannily similar to the wounded beggar in "Beauty and the Beast or The Enormous Wound," who, likewise, is bleeding in the gutters of the city streets, Macabéa sees grass growing out of the concrete:

She lay helpless on the side of the street, perhaps taking a break from all these emotions, and saw among the stones lining the gutter the wisps of

green grass as the most tender human hope. Today, she thought, today is the first day of my life: I was born.³⁵

Like grass, Lispector's writing is constructed from numerous strands creating a fluid, subterranean prose. Collage-like, constructed of various collected notes, the writing becomes a mosaic, a montage, defying categorization.

As Adam Shellhouse writes in *Anti-Literature: The Politics and Limits of Representation in Modern Brazil and Argentina*, "when asked of her outsider-yet-consecrated position in the Brazilian and Latin American literary traditions, Lispector never hesitated to mark her distance."³⁶ In the TV Cultura interview, when asked about her professionalism, Lispector insists she is not a professional and that, furthermore, her freedom is a result of her not being a professional writer. In the same interview, she explains that she writes when she wants to, as if her writing were a hobby, something to do to pass the time. In both of these stances, Lispector resists the valorization of the writer and of literature. Here, she is commenting upon the distance between the literary world and the world of the poor and the working class. As Shellhouse writes, "Against professionalization and etiquettes, straying from what she called 'the superficial world of literary writers,' Lispector's constructivist approach turns on problematizing the separation between writing and life (qtd. in Varin 195). The consummation of her vision, what she called a '*linguagem de vida*' (a language of life), implies an exodus from the Latin American literary regime of representation (*Outros* 106)."³⁷

Resisting both the experimental writing that could be experienced as mere aesthetic or wordplay and the "identitarian" writing that serves to categorize writers according to their identity, Lispector's work does neither. Feminine, fluid, as Lispector writes in *The Hour of the Star*, "I am not an intellectual, I write with my body."³⁸ Writing from the body and its affects, the writing, itself, resists categorization. It also insists on its reliance on the

wound. The author is hurt, she is traumatized by the world, and this wounding is lifted and dropped into the writing. Examples of this are found in *The Hour of the Star*, where the male narrator, Rodrigo, writes of the pain of narrating the story of the poverty-stricken protagonist, Macabéa. This also occurs with Clara in “Beauty and the Beast or the Enormous Wound,” who, upon encountering the reality of poverty in the figure of the beggar she encounters on the side of the street, is, herself, wounded. Indeed, Lispector copies her internal world down to the letter, as she writes in *The Hour of the Star*, “What I have to do is copy myself out with the delicacy of a white butterfly.”³⁹

Despite Bishop’s misunderstanding of her work, Lispector was, indeed, familiar with the literary: both the literary establishment and their writing. Lispector resisted the literary world, what she saw as an elite enterprise responsible for creating categories based on hierarchies, a reflection of the class-based culture. “Literature,” she writes “is a detestable word — it’s outside the act of writing.”⁴⁰ Indeed, in her televised interview she stated that the writer’s role is “to speak as little as possible.” And in *The Hour of the Star*, she wrote: “I am absolutely tired of literature; only muteness keeps me company. If I still write it’s because I have nothing better to do in the world while I wait for death.”⁴¹

This fluid system of narration organically produces interruptions and ruptures, intercepting possible reductions of meaning. Within each of the three narrators exist strands from one another. One instance of this is their shared class background: Macabéa, of course, comes from Recife, as does Lispector, as does Rodrigo. Furthermore, Rodrigo, though a writer, insists on his being a laborer. Twice in the text he states this explicitly. When describing Macabéa’s plight, he says: “It’s not comfortable now: to speak of the girl I can’t shave for days and must acquire dark circles under my eyes from lack of sleep, nodding off from sheer exhaustion. I am a manual laborer.”⁴² Later in the text, when explaining how he has had to strive for

simplicity in language in order to write about Macabéa in an honest way, he states, “I intend, as I earlier suggested, to write in an even simpler way. Anyway the material I’ve got is too plain and meager, the information about my characters spare and not very elucidating, this information that painstakingly comes from me to myself, it’s a carpenter’s job.”⁴³ Here, this is clearly Lispector speaking through the voice of the male narrator, insisting she has not abandoned her working-class background while, at the same time, describing the physical work of producing writing from the body as a form of physical labor. She is not, in other words, as she has stated elsewhere, an “intellectual” but, rather, a worker whose work consists of mining her own body for its silent invisible scars. Writing from the body, accessing these invisible scars, and attempting to translate these silences into a language is excruciating. It can lead to death.

This insistence on simple language speaks to the author’s wish to include only facts and to not falsify through the use of fabrication or decoration. As Lispector writes: “Naturally, like every writer I’m tempted to use succulent terms: I know splendid adjectives, meaty nouns, and verbs so slender that they travel sharp through the air about to go into action, since words are actions, don’t you agree?”⁴⁴ But to use such language would be counter to the world she is describing, as Lispector explains, “I’m not going to adorn the word because if I touch the girl’s bread the bread will turn to gold — and the girl (she’s nineteen) the girl wouldn’t be able to bite it, dying of hunger.”⁴⁵

Here, Lispector is also speaking to the concept of the literary and its place in the class system. As Sonia Roncador writes in *A Poetics of Impoverishment: Clarice Lispector’s narrative of the 1970s*:

in Lispector’s late narratives, no one can be exposed to the destitution of these characters without having his/her own vision of the world affected. But poverty tends to be presented in Lispector’s literature not simply as a

theme, but as the very condition under which she herself (or a narrator) writes.⁴⁶

This change in her writing aesthetic came about due to her increasing concern about social class. The work she made during these years, writing that includes *The Hour of the Star* and “Beauty and the Beast or the Enormous Wound,” was diaristic, and made use of montage, fragments, paratexts, and topics that the literary world deems unworthy (poverty, for instance, and the abject). The result are texts that neither describe nor are mere aesthetic constructions (bringing about pleasure for the reader). Rather, it is writing that conveys “real” life. This work is akin, then, to Loden’s *Wanda* or Linkous’s “dirty” music. As Roncador writes, “Lispector’s late style — a declaration of war against her own previous aesthetics and on the institution of literature — coincided with the entrance into her writing of degrading images of poverty and starvation.”⁴⁷ Her final work, *The Hour of the Star*, exemplifies this type of writing. In addition, the text includes a number of what can be considered deconstructive devices such as a “Dedication by the author,” and inclusion of a list of thirteen possible alternative titles (one of which is the author’s name).

At the same time, Lispector is aware of her audience’s inability to see. Specifically, their inability to see the working class and the poor. She is aware of the existential shock that occurs when the middle class are forced to see the reality of their class and its effect on others. In other words, she is aware of the inherent dangers — that her audience, the middle class, is reading her text with their cultural privileges and biases, their blind spots. In *The Hour of the Star*, she explains how she has utilized punctuation in order to delimit meaning: “If instead of a period it were followed by ellipses, the title would be open to possible imaginings of yours, perhaps even depraved and pitiless.”⁴⁸

When Elizabeth Bishop labels Lispector a “primitive painter,” her class privilege is made evident. Bishop’s labeling of Lispector in this way is an

act of fixing Lispector in her place. As Lispector was well aware, and as she shows, for instance, in her story “The Beauty and the Beast, or The Wound,” the privileged are ignorant of their ignorance.

Lispector wrote repeatedly how her writing came from her own life. For example, in *The Hour of the Star*, she writes, “Even though I don’t have anything to do with the girl, I’ll have to write out all of myself through her amidst frights of my own.”⁴⁹ Macabéa is a stand-in for Lispector; Lispector a stand in for Macabéa. And it is through Lispector’s own lived experience, through her own wounded body, that she writes: “What I write is more than mere invention, it’s my obligation to tell about this one girl out of the thousands like her. And my duty, however artlessly, to reveal her life.”⁵⁰ Beneath what her readers see, an enigma, a sacred monster, is only ever a girl from Recife or, rather, a writer writing from the body of this young girl from Recife. And her writing is a vehicle, always driving her back to the place of her origins — before she became the enigmatic “monster.” “The sacred monster died: in its place a solitary girl was born.”⁵¹

CONCLUSION

I've looked into the future and I can't find myself ANYWHERE.

— Laura Grace Ford, *Savage Messiah*

From 2005 until 2009, Laura Grace Ford (formerly Laura Oldfield Ford) documented the class cleansing of London. She chronicled the landscapes of the working-class neighborhoods destroyed in order to build new condos and shopping malls, and the lives and homes of those whose communities were destroyed, through an amalgamation of drawings, poetry, photographs, and diaristic notetaking. These were collected in a series of zines she self-published under the title *Savage Messiah*. In 2011, Verso Books published the zines in a collection under the same name. Mark Fisher describes the project in his introduction for the book, “Always Yearning for the Time That Just Eluded Us”:

The perspective Ford adopts, the voices she speaks in — and which speak through her — are those of the officially defeated: the punks, squatters, ravers, football hooligans and militants left behind by a history which has ruthlessly Photoshopped them out of its finance friendly *SimCity*.¹

Like Walter Benjamin's *One Way Street*, Ford's *Savage Messiah* is a foray into the urban — one endless, itinerant movement through its internal mazes and minutiae. These “drifts,” as Ford calls them, motioning to the Situationists, allude to the possibility of escape within the urban, forgotten places within the city where one can lose one's self. In *Savage Messiah*, Ford captures this time before such places were razed and all possibility for losing one's self within the wilds of the city was permanently destroyed.

When cities began their class-cleansing projects, the working class lost not just their homes, as their neighborhoods were cleared out for the arrival of the suburban middle class, they also lost the possibility for leisure *vis a vis* urban drift. When all that remains of the cities are glass-encased shopping malls, corporate banks, and chain drugstores, there is no place left to retreat except inside one's living space — if, of course, one is fortunate enough to have one. These spaces are sites of survival for the working class because they allow for pockets of time where one can escape from the endless onslaught of work and worries connected to a life of precarity. This desire for time and space within which to forget one's self is not available to the working class. Leisure is a luxury sequestered for the middle class. Ford's *Savage Messiah* archives a world filled with landscapes, buildings, people, and homes now gone, a world that will never return. It stands in for the void, for what is now gone. Like all gentrification projects, the losers are always the poor and the working class. In one of her zines, she writes:

I got invited up for a cup of tea in one of those Tecton flats on the Harrow Road, one of the old men from the day centre I work in. I took him up Kilburn High Road shopping and watered the fuchsias on his balcony. We talked about the Blitz and hospitals mostly. He used to be a scientist and wrote shopping lists on brown envelopes dated and filed in a stack of biscuit tins.

I miss him.

I miss them all.²

The act of drawing and the diaristic aspect of the project suggests a ritualistic element, as if Ford believed that by getting everything down as it was happening, she might be able to keep the collapsing world intact, to capture it in its entirety as it was falling away. Another aspect to this project

that separates it from others is the fact that Ford is, herself, a part of the world she is documenting.

Such projects are necessary — without them we wouldn't know what was erased for the new, slick buildings that stand in their place. Also, like the other working-class artists and writers discussed in this book, the artist here is intrinsic to the project. Artists who attempt to depict the lives of the working class who are not from the working class must necessarily write from a detached point of view. As a result, such projects become anthropological: the writer and reader stand outside the experience being depicted, creating yet one more layer of marginalization. They also tend to lean on old tropes and stereotypes, keeping the working class fixed in place. Of course, this does not mean that all working-class writers and artists will be able to accurately depict the lives of the working class. If, for example, a working-class artist eschews their origins, assimilating into the middle class, denigrating and vilifying the working class can become part of this assimilation process. Utilizing the myths of neoliberalism, such artists ascribe their success to meritocracy, blaming those who do not succeed according to the dictates of neoliberalism as being lazy. What such artists end up portraying is a world constructed of preconceived stereotypes and caricatures of what the working class are.

But to be inside the frame of the picture, to document what you see there as that world is being erased, is an impossible task. It is easier to die — (literally, through suicide) or to die through assimilation — than to have to watch your world as it is slowly being erased. Ford does neither. By recording her own life — at it is lived — she is able to capture and collect the fragments of a world now gone. Here, again, an excerpt from *Savage Messiah*:

That boarded up place I grew up in, that house made my earliest memories and haunted my dreams still. The ceramic trinkets in the little glass cabinet, china teacups pink and gold, the Toby jugs and horse brasses from when

they ran the pub. And the bathroom all pink, the tiles with little roses, the smell of shampoo and the space helmet hairdryer. And in the later years, her looking out of the window from a yellow dreyllon settee surrounded by piles of Daily Star and TV listings magazines. I knew that house, every swirl in the carpet, pale green and black, the table with fruit bowl, copies of Woman's Own, remote controls and sometimes bourbons or a plate of iced fancies. I made tea looking out on a bare garden punctuated by rocks and struggling roses, she would say bring that tin of biscuits and two plates.

And now all that is gone. She is away. Not dead, but hidden from the world, shrunk back in a diorama of memories and fictions. It seemed to just happen at once. But you had to keep going, a voice came in saying it and saying it, that same voice that always came and I was never sure if it was mine, or my Mums or one of the ones who had gone already, that you had to keep going because there were others who needed you, others you had to stay for.³

Rather than a proper archive, *Savage Messiah* might be seen instead as the notebook of a crime scene. Similar to the one in which, in 2003, I collected data related to the medical malpractice of a military doctor whose "routine surgery" resulted in the permanent blindness of my father. Upon hearing what happened, I flew directly to Germany and travelled to Rammstein, the US military base where the surgery occurred. For days I sat at my father's bedside. In a state of shock, he attempted to recount the names and dates, including the smallest minutiae in the hope that by collecting everything, frantically, in a whirr of unbelief and exhaustion, we might somehow be able to trace the violence back to its origin and thus, though my father's sight was now decimated, pin the unfathomable loss at the locus where it rightly belonged. In this case, it wasn't difficult: the doctor who performed the surgery was negligent. He was the cause. And yet, because he was a medical doctor protected by the US government, he would never face any form of discipline for what he did.

Savage Messiah is unlike my own notes regarding the violence enacted on my father — my notes chronicle one man and one family's encounter with annihilation while Ford's project documents an entire community's — except that it is also an attempt to record the names, dates, and places before they were destroyed, vanquished from memory. Her project, then, is less of an archive for posterity, and rather a means of getting down the data necessary to locate the place — the shimmer in the ruin — where the possibility of redemption might still be possible.

The work is not sentimental. Ford shows us everything: the ruin, the alcohol, and drugs. But also the beauty and vastness of these live, urban spaces. Weeded, with water and flowers, discarded trash and furniture, these are the in-between spaces where those who wish to escape the endless numbness of work, the relentlessness of poverty, and the oppressive, all-encompassing power of neoliberalism could lose themselves. These non-spaces are not the same ones that Marc Augé describes in his book *Non-Places* —such as airports and shopping malls that have been proliferating under neoliberalism. Instead, the dead zones Ford writes of are still in some way wild — not yet tamed or swallowed up by capitalism.

When I first moved to New York City over twenty years ago, though it was no longer what it had been, there were still neighborhoods where I could get lost, small pubs and junk shops where I could waste time, think about things or merely daydream, forget myself and my life. I was adjuncting, as I am now, working semester to semester without job security, no health insurance, and with no safety net. On weekends, I'd make my way to neighborhoods where it was still possible to lose one's self. This is where I would escape to (only the privileged have the luxury of escaping the city).

I could walk across the island of Manhattan, and in doing so enter other zones, other worlds, realms I was creating as I walked and thought. As I did so, I descended into these worlds. I was able to locate both physical and

mental space — both of which I did not have access to at the apartment I was living in. This phenomena of locating space through movement is akin to nomadic travel and is also similar to the experience of being under the spell of certain intoxicants. For the poor and the working class, without access to automobiles or the necessary economic capital necessary for travel, who find themselves trapped in small living quarters (small apartments, prisons, homeless shelters, or other institutions), such wild spaces are paramount.

Now that the city is essentially a suburban shopping mall for wealthy New Yorkers, where every block is yet another corporate bank, chain store, or pharmacy, where every last bit of space has been smoothed over with cement for yet another cheap, quickly constructed, Miami-style high-rise condominium for the rich, the only place left to escape, the only space I can lose myself, is inside the four walls of my tiny apartment. When the only place left to escape is behind the closed doors of our private living spaces, it's no wonder so many of us turn to the internet and drugs, self-or otherwise-prescribed, as a last-ditch attempt at escape, if only momentarily.

Inside the ever-present ideology of neoliberalism, in which each of us is the CEO of our own entrepreneurial project constructed entirely of the different facets of ourselves we can capitalize on and sell for profit, there is no downtime. When our presence — on- and off-screen — has been reduced to the performative, our every act a mere symbolic gesture mechanized to add currency to the commodity of our persona, there is no longer any time off from work. Work is all time, and time becomes one endless stream: ahistorical and without any true future, just the ever-present promise of aspiration: if I work hard enough, I will become someone. But who? And for those of us who can't or don't want to engage in these practices, where can we go? And within what timeframe do we exist?

We can look to the past. In contemporary parlance the term nostalgia has a sentimental connotation to it. This sense of sentimentality though has

less to do with the actual term and its original meaning and more to do with capitalist ideology. The word “nostalgia” was originally coined in 1688 by a Swiss doctor as a way to describe the homesickness and melancholia experienced by Swiss mercenaries fighting in foreign lands, who missed their home country and may never be able to return. This sickness had also been known in German “*Heimweh*” (homesickness), or “*Schweizerheimweh*” (Swiss homesickness). By 1770, the definition of the term interprets it as a “morbid longing to return to one’s home or native country, severe homesickness considered as a disease.” By the 1830s the term was used to describe the homesickness of sailors, slaves, and convicts. The more contemporary meaning of a yearning for the past is connected to literature, originating in the early twentieth century. The term “nostalgia” then, though sentimentalized in contemporary culture, is in its original usage closer to the definition of melancholy.

And yet, though the term is an apt description of the melancholia the working-class subject feels toward their working-class origins, nostalgia is not what Ford is referring to. Instead, her work functions in alignment with Benjamin’s concept of redemption and his idea that it is in the fragment, in the shards and remnants of the past, where we might find the possibility for revolutionary change.

Savage Messiah is a constellation of fragments: texts, drawings, and photographs cut and pasted. Furthermore, throughout the zines, Ford includes fragments, lists of places, names, and objects, resulting in further fragmentation. As Ford stated in an interview with *Mute*, there are “shards of messianic time hidden in the built environment waiting to be realised.”⁴ This concept is in direct opposition to the neoliberal project of aspiration and its inherent striving for a kind of totality.

When we accept reality, and as a result accept who we are, then we can turn away from the neoliberal promise of “progress” and forgetfulness and begin, instead, to reckon with the past. This is the beginning of the

possibility of redemption. Not for us, of course, but for the past. Though the title of Ford's zine series originates from the biography of the French sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, the word "messiah" also connects directly with Benjamin's essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In it, Benjamin writes that every generation has a "weak messianic power," and looks to the future for redemption:

there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim.⁵

It is in moments of danger that we might find redemption for the past. Indeed, the essay was written in 1940, several months before Benjamin's suicide in September of that year at Port Bau, the night before he was scheduled to emigrate to the United States. It was written within the window, as it was closing. Though he was able to escape Paris and make his way to Spain, where he planned to travel by water to freedom, he died the night before he was meant to flee, after ingesting a lethal dose of morphine. Knowing he was at the end — of his life in Europe, at least, and then, perhaps, of his life lived — he wrote it in a moment of urgency, in a state of emergency.

The "weak messianic power" Benjamin alludes to is the power the oppressed have in the moment of possibility to redeem the oppressed of the past. And yet it is a "weak" power because its very action is both fleeting and, at the same time, filled with danger. In the momentary flash of possible redemption, the ghosts of the past whose lives and histories have been forgotten are made vulnerable. Inside a swirl of possibility that is at once a fragment of immense danger, as Benjamin writes, "*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious."⁶

Benjamin describes the topic of history further, explaining that “History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time (*Jetztzeit*)”⁷ In a footnote to the essay, Hannah Arendt notes that Benjamin’s use of the term *Jetztzeit* is not simply an equivalent to the German word *Gegenwart*, that is, “present.”⁸ Rather, he is thinking of the mystical “*nunc stans*,” which refers to eternal existence, time not subject to the limitations of time. For Benjamin, *Jetztzeit* describes a concept of time filled with revolutionary promise; opposed to “empty, homogeneous time.”

Benjamin’s method was to unleash “the enormous energies of history that are bound up in the ‘once upon a time’ of classical historiography.” The history that showed things “as they really were” was, he writes, “the strongest narcotic of the century.”⁹ For Benjamin, the means through which to liberate these energies bound in the past was through the use of the quotation. Benjamin believed the practice of citation could serve as the “bridge that links past and present in the dialectical fabrication of historical experience.”¹⁰

The act of lifting the shards and fragments of history through the employment of citation is opposed to the usual means of regarding history as a fixed or flattened solid mass. Likened to montage, collage, and assemblage, Benjamin’s concept, due to its inherent dialectical nature, implies a sense of movement — each disparate bit, shard, or image situated near one another like movable parts. This concept suggests a means of moving the past — as if lifting a net of loose bits — up and into the now. A process that Benjamin describes, in the original German, using the Hegelian term *Aufhebung*.

In the same thesis, XVII, he writes:

The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a

messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.¹¹

It is in his description of how these fragments of the past can be “blasted away” that he writes: “As a result of this method, the lifework is both preserved and sublated *in* the work, the era *in* the lifework, and the entire course of history *in* the era.”¹² It is here, in this sentence, in the original German, that Benjamin uses the term *Aufhebung*. *Aufhebung* is a notoriously untranslatable word because it holds a number of opposite meanings: to “negate,” “cancel,” “annihilate,” “preserve,” and to “lift.” Similar to Freud’s term *Verneinung*, *Aufhebung* brings us not back to the object that was “not meant” (Mother, for Freud) but, rather, something preserved that can only be brought about through its negation. In other words, whatever it preserves is preserved by being activated through the dialectical moment.

In *The Souvenir* we are shown images from archives, photographs of people and places that no longer exist, both at the opening of the film and later, when Julie is working on her fictionalized documentary of Sunderland. In the film there is no context given when these images are portrayed. Presumably, we are to form our own understanding of them. And yet, as with *Savage Messiah*, there is a sense that these archival images might provide entry to another world.

But what about the working class? What can such archival work, aside from providing a sense of solace and comfort, of being at home in the world, offer us? Such images, I believe, can provide a form of rupture — providing entry to a past the current world would rather us not have access to. The shards of possibility in *Savage Messiah*, like objects and artifacts working-class artists and writers collect or include in their work, similarly provide such possibilities. And so do the artists themselves. Their work and their existence provide ruptures in an otherwise endless bland stream of

homogeneous images. As Benjamin writes, “The subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class itself.”¹³

That there are two worlds and two histories is evidenced through the two types of history Benjamin illuminates: the flattened history as it is told by its victors, what he calls “things as they really are,” and the forgotten history of the oppressed. These two histories are occurring simultaneously. What is happening to the working class on a daily basis — the rising rates of incarceration, the criminalization of and violence against them, the lack of income and access to health care, and the subsequent trauma and illness resulting from these experiences — is occurring at the same time as the middle class are living in an entirely different world. What the middle class considers exceptional, what is shocking to the middle class, is everyday reality for the working class and the poor. As Benjamin writes, “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule.”¹⁴

And yet — because we are already marginalized, there is, too, the possibility of exit already folded into our marginalization. When we are already outside of the system, it is that much easier to drop out completely. Indeed, it is far easier to pull away from the world when we were never part of that world to begin with. For Irvine Welsh’s characters, for instance, or the “inmates” in *High Life*, despised and excluded from society, it’s easier to say No to neoliberal society because they are already standing outside of it. Because we stand outside the system and are not transfixed by the shimmer and slickness of it, we can see the remnants and shards of the world that came before it and that still exist within it.

Claiming our place in the class struggle will help clarify the truth of our experience and awaken us to what is actually happening. This awakening can only result in a choice between attempting to assimilate into the middle-class capitalist culture or to be honest with ourselves, recognizing who we

are and where we come from, and align ourselves, instead, with the working class.

When the working-class artist makes work from their quotidian experience, which includes the everyday objects and encounters of our daily lives, we are already engaging in a form of *Aufhebung*. By lifting and dropping these objects into our work, we are also already automatically dragging in the lost histories of the working class with us. And by dropping objects from our everyday lives into our work we are, in the process, weaving in our memories, both *mémoire volontaire* and *mémoire involontaire*. As Benjamin writes:

Experience is indeed a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life. It is the product less of facts firmly anchored in memory [*Erinnerung*] than of accumulated and frequently unconscious data that flow together in memory [*Gedächtnis*].¹⁵

Akin to Benjamin's use of the quotation, this work of archiving serves to lift the shards and fragments of history, and place them into the present. Of course, Benjamin himself was engaged in archival practices: collecting, among other objects, books, Russian toys, words, notebooks, and postcards. "In "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin writes of Proust, "In sum, Proust says that the past is situated 'somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect and its field of operations, in some material object... though we have no idea which one it is.'" ¹⁶

But in order to access the *mémoire involontaire*, these "flashes" of memory that occur solely by chance, we need access to leisure, we need to find ways to locate the dead time. Without this, we simply won't be able to access the delicate film of *mémoire involontaire*, that ephemeral substance that dissipates and vanishes as soon as the mind begins its utilitarian thinking. Locating leisure time in order to waste it may seem self-destructive or even idiotic. And yet this type of thinking, thinking with or

through negation, is how we will begin to find ourselves again. First, by saying no to the middle-class capitalist world, turning away from it, and then by taking the time, using this dead time, to ask ourselves where the space is between who we are and where we come from and where the middle-class world begins. This won't be easy or simple because much of what we have assumed were our own dreams or values, ideas or aesthetics, turn out to have been those of the middle-class culture, ideologies we've internalized so long ago, without having been conscious of ever having done so.

This work of undoing will take time. By wasting time, by doing nothing, we can access memory, memory that is graspable only when we are looking askance. This "looking askance" or zoning out is comparable to dissociating, something many, if not all of us, have become so familiar with, have been engaging in for so long, we may no longer be aware of it. The term dissociation is considered "negative," something those who are traumatized or otherwise "broken" suffer from. But I think we should look closer at the term. The definition of the word "dissociate" is to "sever the association or connection of," especially "cut off from society." The second meaning is psychologically-based and is "characterized by mental disjunction," hence "dissociated personality," a "pathological state in which two or more distinct personalities exist in the same person." These two distinct definitions of the word are our two paths: we can either separate ourselves from middle-class society or we can become spilt — doubling, becoming a zombie, existing as living dead.

This downtime and *mémoire involontaire*, has similarities to Freud's concept of the conscious and unconscious, and how when we attempt to remember an event from the past, we are often unable to. Such memories, instead, arise in dreams or in flashes. Of course, the unconscious haunts us, marking every aspect of our lives. Indeed, what we would rather not recall or ever think about, we repress, as if pushing memories or thoughts away

might force them out past the horizon of our lives forever. Instead, the more we attempt to vanquish memory or thoughts, the more they appear, repeating over and over in different forms and disguises. We may try to push away our working-class origins, pretending to be not-working class, but our origins follow us. Like the undead that we become as a result of our attempts to vanquish our pasts, our origins haunt us, spirits pressing up against the windows of our unconscious.

For the working class, locating leisure time is an impossible task — how do we locate deadtime when our every hour is consumed already by dead-end jobs? And yet, the impossible is possible. In Hegel's Preface to *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, he articulates the impossibility of a text's Preface, and yet, he writes and includes one. What is impossible, in other words, may not be literally possible, if what we mean by literal is linear or attempting to find a solution through "common sense." And yet the impossible may be possible if we work through this impossibility through a dialectic.

The working class is a vehicle for possibility, akin to Benjamin's messianic shards. We carry our history within us: our very existence makes it evident that social class, specifically, the working class, does, indeed, exist. Our collective melancholia is a humming, it is a constant. And it will not go away. And though it will not leave us, we can allow it to guide us.

We have learned to survive, just barely, in the spaces between — between worlds, between deaths — in an endless waiting. Is it not possible for us to navigate together, in an act of resistance against a system that would like us dead, or if not dead, alive, but just barely? Is it possible, in other words, for a retreat — an act of communal negation — one in which we say no to assimilation and instead, come together? There are so many of us, all of us waiting. If we came together, who knows what we could do.

NOTES

Introduction

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