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Managing Power:
Heroism in the Age of Speculative Capital

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Joshua Danley Pearson

September 2018

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Sherryl Vint, Chairperson

Dr. Tamara Ho

Dr. Stephen Sohn

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The Dissertation of Joshua Danley Pearson is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Managing Power:
Heroism in the Age of Speculative Capital

by

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Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, September 2018
Dr. Sherryl Vint, Chairperson

This project identifies a recurring figure in late 20th century popular culture, the power manager, who is distinguished by a specific conjunction of “cool” sociopathic affect, “hollowed-out” interiority, and specialization in the immaterial labor of speculation and manipulation. This figure’s emergence and diffusion across Anglophone popular media is intimately connected to the intertwined ascendancies of speculative finance and neoliberal governance as the organizing forces of society. The power manager operates as an idealized model for the financialized subjectivity that neoliberal rationality assumes, whose power over others derives from his early adaptation to the demands of new economic structures. Drawing on theorizations of neoliberal governance and financial discourse by Wendy Brown, Mark Fisher, and Randy Martin, *Managing Power* interrogates popular narratives in order to trace finance capital’s influence on our capacity to imagine social power and agency, looking beyond popular representations of the business world to examine instead how neoliberal and financial logics have seeped into the structure of popular heroism and adventure narratives. By clearly articulating power management as a distinct neoliberal fantasy of masculine power and tracing its

cultural history, *Managing Power* enables us to better diagnose this fantasy's influence on our imagination of social interaction, social power, and social change. These fantasies of financialized power reinforce the message that, as Margaret Thatcher famously declared, "there is no alternative" to the neoliberal status quo. As a figure of elite cognitive labor, the power manager serves an important ideological role as a figure of male dominance able to navigate the shifts from productive to service/finance capitalism, as well as providing scripts of dominance that retrench white privilege in a time of growing diversity in both the workplace and popular culture. *Managing Power* exposes the pathologies of this fantasy of financialized neoliberal subjectivity, trace its influence, and so undermine the ideological justifications it continues to provide for inequality and privilege in contemporary literature and culture.

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Introduction
**Unmasking the Fantasy of
Neoliberal Subjectivity**

This project identifies a recurring figure in late 20th century popular culture, the power manager, who is distinguished by a specific conjunction of “cool” sociopathic affect, “hollowed-out” interiority, and specialization in the immaterial labor of speculation and manipulation. I argue that this figure’s emergence and diffusion across Anglophone popular media, from science fiction literature, to superhero comics, to dramatic television, is intimately connected to the intertwined ascendancies of speculative finance and neoliberal governance as the organizing forces of society. The power manager operates as an idealized model for the financialized subjectivity that neoliberal rationality assumes, whose power over others derives from early adaptation to the demands of the new socioeconomic reality.

By clearly articulating power management as a distinct neoliberal fantasy of masculine power and tracing its cultural history, *Managing Power* enables us to better diagnose this fantasy’s influence on our imagination of social interaction, social power, and social change. These fantasies of financialized power reinforce the message that, as Margaret Thatcher famously declared, “there is no alternative” to the neoliberal status quo. As a figure of elite cognitive labor, the power manager serves an important ideological role as a figure of male dominance able to navigate the shifts from productive to service/finance capitalism, as well as providing scripts of dominance that retrench white privilege in a time of growing diversity in both the workplace and popular culture. *Managing Power* seeks to expose the pathologies of this fantasy of financialized

neoliberal subjectivity, tracing out its influence, to undermine the ideological justifications it continues to provide for inequality and privilege in contemporary literature and culture.

0.1 Political Context

The crisis of 2008 brought finance capital and its volatile culture of speculative risk to the forefront of public consciousness and civic discourse. Pundits, scholars, and concerned citizens alike were outraged as it became clear that, far from being the “smartest guys in the room,” the traders driving the financial markets did not fully understand the complex financial instruments they created or the consequences of their reckless (and often corrupt) trade in them. Even Alan Greenspan, the high priest of neoliberalism who presided over finance’s takeover of the US economy as Chairman of the Federal Reserve from 1987-2006, was forced to admit that there was a “flaw in the model” (Qtd in Lee and Martin 2016). For a moment, it looked like the economic and political ideology that had propelled finance to the forefront of the world economy might be up for re-appraisal.

A decade later, though, we must admit that finance capital’s hold over our society is just as strong, if not stronger. While the financial *industry* may have lost some of its cultural prestige and social legitimacy, financial *capital* retains its power to shape the democratic and economic structures of contemporary life. In the wake of political movements like Occupy Wall Street and the Presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders, much of the discourse about the influence of finance on public life centers on confronting “the one percent.” Anger at the parasitic elite is certainly justified—not to mention

cathartic—in light of the profound suffering and inequality they have profited from. But such *moral* anger at the hoarding of the rich and feckless greed on Wall Street obscures the fact that the crisis in which we find ourselves is grounded in the *logic of finance capitalism itself*. As Cédric Durand argues, “no attempt to explain the crisis in terms of the immorality of financial actors will stand up to analysis” (*Fictitious Capital* 1).

More importantly, while political projects defined in opposition to “the one percent” or even “the top ten percent” provide a productive start for discussions of class politics in America, dualistic oppositions between “the rich” and “the rest of us” obscure the extent to which neoliberal modes of thinking, feeling, and acting have become ubiquitous throughout our culture. We increasingly find ourselves conceptualizing our relations with the world, the future, and each other through the logics of speculative investment and risk management that animate finance capitalism. As Wendy Brown argues in *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, the more our “commonsense” understandings of self, agency, and society are infiltrated by the logic of finance capitalism, the more difficult it becomes to imagining “realistic” ways of challenging this corrupt sociopolitical order, because neoliberalism itself has come to define the scope of the possible. Mark Fisher calls this artificial horizon to social thinking “capitalist realism.” Piercing the veil of capitalist realism to imagine radical alternatives requires us to recognize how the logic of finance capital has seeped into every aspect of contemporary life, from political and military strategy, to public education, to online dating and social media.

0.2 Decoding the Ideology of Heroic Spectacle

Managing Power interrogates popular narratives of heroic action in order to trace finance capital's infiltration of our capacity to imagine social power outside the bounds of neoliberal rationality. I look beyond popular representations of the business world to examine instead how neoliberal and financial logics are expressed in the imagination of popular heroism and adventure narratives. Rather than merely tracking changes in the depiction of bankers and CEOs, I look for ways the skills and capacities demanded by postindustrial financial capitalism became increasingly prominent in heroes and villains of all kinds within the popular fiction of the period of neoliberalism's development and emergence into dominance, roughly 1960 to 2006. I turn to popular culture and genre fiction as my primary archive because, as Ramzi Fawaz argues in *New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics*, such popular narratives are "aesthetic and social responses to the limits of contemporary political imaginaries" (23). In other words, such narratives function as popular fantasies of power, narrative worlds that help us cognitively map changes in the macro-scale structures of our "real" world that are otherwise difficult to grasp, intellectually, emotionally, and ethically.¹

The cognitive maps of financial capitalism found in popular fantasy are particularly worthy of critical attention because, as Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee

¹ Fawaz's own usage of "popular fantasy" is a bit different from my use it here. While theoretically sophisticated, Fawaz's argument figures the publicly negotiated cognitive mappings of popular fantasy as inherently queer and inevitably progressive. While I think his unrelenting positivity is, to some extent, an intentional provocation—perhaps in response to currents of queer negativity or queer pessimism—for my own purposes I do not view the popular fantasy as ideologically fixed. As we shall see, I find them to contain contradictory ideological impulses. The whole point of popular fantasy, it seems to me, is to create a space for the public to struggle with those contradictions, even if they go unresolved—or, following Althusser, if they are magically resolved.

argue in *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk*, although our lives are powerfully shaped by the logic and flows of speculative capital, finance capitalism's abstraction and velocity give it a spectral quality, an "etherealness that complicates the analysis of those who study domination" (15). This quality makes it difficult to confront finance capital within the framework of democratic organizing (9, 12, 15, 94). Indeed, within the professional discourses of finance, from academic economics to the culture of the trading pit, financial capital is figured as operating in "a space outside of representation [...] discernable only through quantification" (65). In the face of this representational challenge, the cognitive maps offered by the popular fantasies of popular culture are valuable, if ideologically fraught, resources. While many of the power management texts I deal with here present the power manager himself as an aspirational figure, such texts nonetheless, as popular fantasies that map the abstract relations of domination through the terms of popular culture, give shape to the ethereal forces of finance capital, which allows us to direct our political energy in opposition to them. Far from being "beyond representation," a survey of 20th century popular culture reveals a rich archive of texts that negotiate the ascent of financial capital through changing tropes of heroism.

In *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that the "process of postmodernization toward an informational economy does not mean that industrial production will be done away with or... cease to play an important role," but rather that this process will "transform industry by redefining" its place within the larger network of economic activity (285). Thus to understand "the production of the soul" in the

informatized postmodern economy, “one ought to replace the traditional techniques of industrial machines with the cybernetic intelligence of information and communication technologies” (289). My research reveals a similar shift in the structure of masculine adventure during the late 20th century. The familiar tropes of pulp heroism do not simply disappear. Icons of industrial productivity (Superman, “more powerful than a locomotive”), working class grit and self-sufficiency (*Die Hard*’s John McClane, Indiana Jones), and primal emotional intensity (*Lethal Weapon*’s Martin Riggs, Conan the Barbarian) remain popular features in the media landscape. As dream images of heroic agency, these figures resound with the might and productivity of industrial machines, and the endurance demanded of workers who service them. But these familiar figures increasingly rub shoulders with, and find themselves defined against, characters whose powers emulate instead from the alacrity, mobility, and flexibility of finance capitalism and immaterial labor. Superman’s strength is overmatched by Batman’s strategic planning. The old figures persist as vehicles of a backward-looking nostalgia, but they also contain the ideological message that agency, excellence, *arête* belongs to those who wield the tools of finance capital. New structures of socioeconomic power demand a new kind of hero: the power manager.

0.3 Theorizing Neoliberal Subjectivity

Central to my reading of power management as a popular fantasy that tries to make sense of the reification of subjectivity in late capitalism is Wendy Brown’s theorization of neoliberalism as a governing rationality in *Undoing the Demos*. Building on Foucault’s *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Brown argues that neoliberalism “extend[s] a

specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life” (30), defining both individual and institutional agents as competitors within markets of human capital (*Undoing*, 9-10, 22, 52, 70). But Brown argues that Foucault’s account of the neoliberal *homo economicus*, composed in the late 1970s, failed to anticipate the extent to which the financial practices of speculation, risk management, and investment/divestment would come to dominate the relations of human capital (70-8). As a result, the “specific model for human capital and its spheres of activity [within neoliberalism] is increasingly that of financial and investment capital” (33). In this financialized context, developing the self becomes a speculative practice, an attempt to pre-adapt to anticipated competitive pressures within future markets in human capital (42, 66, 109-11).

The cultural impact of this speculative model of human capital management is deftly captured in Randy Martin’s discussion of arbitrage in *An Empire of Indifference: American War and the Financial Logic of Risk Management*. Martin’s use of the term “arbitrage” reaches beyond the multitude of highly specialized acts of arbitrage in the day-to-day business of finance—variations on the process of exploiting price discrepancies between markets, buying low to sell high²—to the broader principle that animates them: the impulse to translate all human experience into calculable patterns of risk and opportunity, and to *derive profit* by leveraging one’s knowledge of those

² High Frequency Trading has moved much of this activity out of human hands. On major securities exchanges the “duration of arbitrage opportunities has declined dramatically... from a median of 97 milliseconds in 2005 to a median of 7 milliseconds in 2011” (Budish, Cramton & Shin). A human blink lasts between 100-400 milliseconds.

patterns. LiPuma and Lee repeatedly emphasize that, across all the myriad forms that the trade in financial instruments may take, “the theoretical endpoint [...] is arbitrage” (78).

Martin argues that this broader *financializing logic* of risk management and speculative intervention has spread throughout Anglo-American public discourse. Since the 1970s, the idea that “risks must be assessed to maximize opportunities for the selective application of resources” has been elevated to common sense, not only in economic policy but in the military, sociopolitical, and interpersonal spheres as well (“War at All Costs,” 14). Within post-Thatcher domestic realpolitik, at-risk populations must be carefully managed by a government that “becomes the arbitrageur of disinvestment from the old ways and the retailer of embracing the new” (*Indifference*, 15). The “Revolution in Military Affairs” rearticulates the national security state’s mission as management of systemic risk through investment in a diversified portfolio of strategic assets.³ Across the spectrum of strategic planning activities, actors are encouraged to cultivate a nuanced awareness of complexity, which translates messy reality into quantized, analyzable data, to facilitate “the management of highly volatile small differences in value that are leveraged to large effects” (*Indifference*, 9). As LiPuma and Lee argue, within such financialized discourses of agency and power, leveraging and managing financial risk “becomes the only empowered and empowering notion” (173).

³ The Revolution in Military Affairs (commonly shortened to RMA) is defense policy jargon for various efforts since the 1970s that seek to informatize military command structures, battle tactics, training practices, and equipment procurement. See Blackmore 5-9, 38-67, 148-63. Haraway refers to RMA discourse when she describes “modern war [as a] cyborg orgy, coded by C³I, command-control-communication-intelligence” (“Cyborg” 150).

In contrast to the assumptions of classical liberalism, for whom markets create perfect information and allow rational actors to make balanced exchanges of value, in the neo-liberal market “competition replaces exchange.... When the political rationality of neoliberalism is fully realized [and its] market principles are extended to every sphere, inequality becomes legitimate, even normative, in every sphere” (*Undoing*, 64). All exchanges take place under terms of unequal power and unequal knowledge, and so all “exchange” becomes a form of short-selling that presupposes a winner and a loser. Within neoliberalism, this unequal market relationship is framed as the model for all human relations. As Martin argues, then, arbitrage—the practice of exploiting disparities in market knowledge—becomes a useful conceptual metaphor for neoliberal modes of social interaction, as well as economic, political, or martial struggles. All spheres of interaction become sites of strategic maneuvering, fronts in an ever-widening speculative arms race where each tries to anticipate and preempt all others. As Martin argues, the result is the “militarization of all manner of policy” (“War at All Costs,” 14).

Popular culture is full of masculine protagonists who struggle to adapt to these new structures of power. But the power manager goes further: power management elevates the management of the self as a capital project to the level of epic heroism. These characters are not acting as exemplary capitalists; rather, they strive to incarnate the logic of financial capital itself. On one hand, the self becomes a portfolio of assets that are developed and activated to maximize return. On the other hand, all relationships with others take on the form of competitive speculation. Because they operate within finance ontology’s vision of the world as a field of unbounded competition between

capital subjects, power management fantasies are always fantasies of competitive advantage. The position of advantage and the exercise of domination are always prioritized over the happiness, satisfaction, or moral health of the power manager. Indeed, a perennial feature of power management narratives is the “tragic” sacrifice of their heroes’ moral qualms and personal relationships upon the altar of competitive advantage.

The result is the hollowed-out interiority and sociopathic affect that is one of the defining characteristics of the power manager. I read this as an attempt to craft a self that incarnates the essential characteristics of “opportunistic and speculative capital” that, as LiPuma and Lee argue,

is constantly on the prowl for sudden and random inefficiencies across markets [...] To pounce on these episodic possibilities, [such] capital must be immediately available rather than tethered to long-term investments [...] the result is that the opportunistic nature of speculative capital materializes as a drive to be mobile, nomadic, and fixated on short-term ventures” (125).

When this rootless, prowling speculative capital becomes the model for human subjectivity, long-term investments—in relationships, communities, or even stable identities—are barriers to the free circulation and opportunism that allows for profitable arbitrage. Power management narratives explore the hollowed-out subjectivity that remains when such attachments are severed, and the sociopathic arbitrageur is free to circulate and innovate at vertiginous speeds.

0.4 White Washing Immaterial Labor

As many scholars of race and representation have noted, transparency, objectivity, and alacrity are traits associated with whiteness in Western culture. Despite the work of such scholars—and the lived knowledge of nonwhite people—in mainstream culture

whiteness, like the world of finance, continues to be imagined as a space beyond representation. As Richard Dyer argues, “white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular,” but by token of that very emptiness, being ready to adapt to and exercise mastery over any specific field or endeavor (*The Matter of Images* 126). Throughout this project, I argue that a central part of the power management narrative is the theme of *abandonment*: of empathy, community, and identity. But only white cis men have the privilege of renouncing their identity. Queer folks, women, people of color, and the differently abled all have the markers of community and identity imposed on them by society regardless of their chosen/willed identifications. The power management fantasy in which self-abnegation is the gateway to mastery, then, is a fantasy of white power, which makes whiteness itself into a transhuman technology of cognitive labor and control.

Heady, racially tinged narratives about white genius are hardly new, and neither is the affective investment fandoms place in them.⁴ But the power manager’s cultural context and its imbrication with ascendant forms of economic power makes it particularly pernicious. First, the same period through which I track the development of the financialized hero saw the celebrated rise of the female action hero, as well as a significant improvement in the number of characters of color in mainstream genre texts. The proliferation of powerful women like Ellen Ripley, Sarah Connor, Lara Croft, Buffy, Xena, Trinity, and Furiosa (to name just a few) has been widely celebrated and cited as

⁴ A classic case in sf fandom is A.E. van Vogt’s *Slan* (1946) and the ensuing “Fans are Slans” slogan. See Rich Brown 2012. We could, of course, cite examples of toxic fandom from many areas of popular culture, from Gamergate to the alt-right’s adoration of action star Chuck Norris.

evidence of progress in gender relations and representation. Further these female characters all share something with equally celebrated characters played by actors of color such as Zoe Saldana, Wesley Snipes, Will Smith, and Dwayne Johnson: they are heroes articulated in the very industrial-era pulp formats being superseded and rendered nostalgic by the cultural narrative of financialization tracked in this project. *The Matrix* (Wachowski siblings 1999) provides an illustration of how this representational politics infiltrates ostensibly progressive narratives: Trinity and Morpheus are as superbly tough, as supremely dangerous as any white hero of old. But this is no longer enough. The goal posts of heroic agency have been moved. Only Neo, through his rootless, untethered whiteness, has the capacity to fully merge with the deracinated logic of financialized power.⁵ Other common attributes of the financialized white hero, such as affective manipulation and flat affect, code differently when enacted by brown or feminine bodies, whose performances are still read within a history of racist and sexist denial and fear of subaltern power.

Second, while most white supremacist tropes in sf and fantasy are essentially backward looking and nostalgic—the colonial fantasy of the cowboy, the patriarchal fantasy of the feudal warrior, the Edisonade investor-entrepreneur—the power manager’s alignment with ascendant neoliberalism and finance capitalism allows it to draw on what Brown, following Foucault, calls the “veridiction” or truth function of the market:

the veridification of the market has two dimensions in neoliberalism: the market itself is true and also represents the true form of all activity. Rational actors accept

⁵ It is true that Keanu Reeves, the actor who plays Neo, is racially mixed, but as a character Neo is coded as explicitly white. This is part of the wholesale erasure of Asian subjects from the cinematic space of *The Matrix*, even as the film borrows heavily from the *aesthetics* of Asian cultural production.

these truths, thus accept ‘reality;” conversely, those who act according to other principles are not simply irrational, but refuse ‘reality’ (*Undoing* 67)

Power management narratives, in effect, promote the neoliberal “truth” that the extent of one’s resemblance to the deracinated, ruthlessly opportunistic circulation of speculative capital serves as a measure of one’s capacity for social, economic, and political agency. To be like capital is to be powerful. To behave like capital is to accept reality. If white people are better able to comport themselves as human capital, then power management reinforces the ideological conclusion that those who dispute white supremacy “are not simply irrational, but refuse ‘reality.’” In power management, then, “race realism” and “capitalist realism” intermingle, to the detriment of all.⁶

Examining both the roots and the development of the figure of the power manager, then, not only arms us for the task of disentangling the crucial productive capacities of our age from identification with a particularly destructive and dehumanizing construction of white masculinity, but also helps us articulate new avenues of resistance to the neoliberal system of financialized, white-coded power that the sociopathic arbitrageur epitomizes.

0.5 Disambiguation: Antecedents and Alternates⁷

Mark Fisher argues that neoliberalism enforces a “business ontology,” the normative assertion that every endeavor can and should be run as a business (*Capitalist Realism* 17). But as the work of Brown and Martin shows, as the financial sector grew to

⁶ “Race realism” is one of scientific racism’s preferred pseudonyms, because it allows them to frame the proliferation of scholarship on the social construction of race as “race denialism.”

⁷ In the manuscript version of this project, this section will be expanded into its own chapter. These are early indications of how that argument will take shape.

dominate other parts of the economy, the capacities and practices of the speculator redefined the cognitive metaphors of this pernicious form of neoliberal common sense. The result is that Fisher’s “business ontology” could often be more accurately diagnosed as “finance ontology.” I read power management texts as popular fantasies that explore the pressure this ontology places upon the subject—the fantasy of a subjectivity developed in perfect accord with the governing rationality of neoliberalism.

Scholars in the Marxist tradition refer to the pressure which the relations of capital put on the constitution of the subject as the process of the *real subsumption of labor*. First developed by Marx during his work on *Capital*, real subsumption has been taken up and elaborated by many thinkers on the left, from Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin to recent work by Mark Fisher, Steven Shaviro, and Eric D. Smith. While there remains some debate about exactly how real subsumption works and precisely how deeply its effects reach, there is general agreement that a central aspect of our experience as subjects within capitalism is the pressure to shape ourselves so as to fit as seamlessly as possible into the relations of production as we encounter them in our particular moment.⁸ As Shaviro writes, economic relations come to provide guiding cognitive metaphors that extend far beyond our economic behavior, providing “both a calculus for judging human actions and a mechanism for inciting and directing those actions” (*No Speed Limit* 29). Mark Fisher argues that in the last twenty years, the power of subsumption to shape us has become so strong that even our desires for escape and

⁸ Relations of production are subject to change without notice. Some terms and conditions may apply. The relations of production contain substances known by the State of California to cause emiseration and existential crisis.

rebellion are “precorporated”: our attempts at subverting the system are themselves subsumed, and subversion itself becomes a commodity to be consumed (*Capitalist Realism* 8-10).

The power manager is just one among many possible cultural responses to the pressures that real subsumption makes upon the subject. And because capitalism’s relations of production are constantly being “innovated,” subsumption itself is always changing. I argue that power management offers a particularly interesting and revealing portrait of real subsumption during the emergence of neoliberalism, because in it, the subject seeks not simply to adapt to, but to incarnate the logic of capital.

Framing power management as a drama of perfect subsumption not only helps to distinguish it from other seemingly similar exemplars of capitalist subjectivity, but also foregrounds how the power manager epitomizes key aspects that differentiate the logic of subsumption within 20th century financialization from pressures that shaped his 19th century predecessors.

0.5.1 The Flâneur and the Detective

As Giovanni Arrighi argues in *The Long Twentieth Century*, capitalism operates in cycles, not just of boom and bust, but of alternations between the dominance of productively and speculatively oriented capital. The development of the power manager corresponds to the latest such phase of financial dominance, in which circulation rather than production is the key source of profit, and so the normative model in the pressure of real subsumption. As LiPuma and Lee argue, “the touchstone and animating force of the contemporary global transformations is the reemergence of circulation as the cutting edge

of capitalism” (9). But as they go on to argue, what circulates on the “cutting edges” of capitalist innovation are not commodities, but increasingly rarified and abstracted forms of capital itself (9-10). One of the reasons that the form of the derivative instrument has become so central to the operation of finance capitalism is because in it capital needs never materialize to realize its profit (LiPuma and Lee 79, 99, 186). Derivatives come closest to incarnating capital in its self-image as pure velocity. Writing in 1923, Lukacs argued that “reification requires that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange” (91). Immediately we can see the similarity to Brown and Fisher’s description of the pressures of real subsumption today, but also the difference, because, as Brown argues throughout *Undoing the Demos*, within neoliberalism financial logics of investment have displaced exchange as the basic drive of capital. This distinction between capitalist relations valorizing the circulation of commodity capital and those in which capital circulates in abstract and/or immaterial circuits helps us differentiate the power manager from the 19th century masters of perceptive and diagnostic labor, the flâneur described by Walter Benjamin and the detective codified by Arthur Conan Doyle.

It is a massive oversimplification—but not an inaccurate one—to say that one of Benjamin’s goals in *The Arcades Project* was to document the myriad ways in which 19th century Parisian society and subjectivity was defined by sympathy with the commodity and the commodity relation. For Benjamin, this subjective entanglement with the circulation of the commodity crystalized in the typology of the flâneur. As I have argued

elsewhere, Benjamin links the flâneur's privileged mode of perception to his empathy with the commodity (M17a,2), because

the flâneur's restless circulation through marketplace—the sphere of consumption—echoes the commodity's, as does the uncanny tension of his participation in and isolation from social experience of the crowd (M2,8). Like the fetishized commodity, in his circulation the flâneur bears witness to the sociality that underlies the exchange relation, but disavows it in his own performance of singularity. (Pearson 2015).

By incarnating within his own performance of self the characteristics of the commodity, the flâneur gains an uncanny sensitivity to the “occult” networks of connection created by the circulatory process of capital—the whole network of sociality that Marx argues is concealed with commodity fetishism.⁹ The “traces” to which the flâneur sensitizes himself are the evidence of an each object or individual's unique passage through the networks of production and circulation, a backward-looking interrogation of the fetish character of capitalism.

As Benjamin argues, the detective genre emerged out of the same 19th century conjunctions that created the flâneur —urbanization, capitalist modernity, the explosion of social “sciences” such as phrenology and physiognomy that sought to classify (and normalize) difference. Looking back, we might say that such pseudoscience was an attempt to explain the different “value” individuals bring to the emerging markets of human capital. Like the flâneur, the detective must sensitize himself to the trace capital leaves on the subject, recognizing both the “impression” individuals leave in their

⁹ The power manager performs a similar function with the circulation of speculative capital that defines globalized late capitalism. But in our financialized world, the model for subjectivity is not the commodity which tries to shed the traces of circulation, but capital itself, and the power manager is the flâneur of speculative possibility. See Pearson 2015 for how the financial services industry claims a similar position for itself through television advertising.

passage through the second nature of modernity, and the impressions that passage makes upon them.

Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes provides the canonical example of the detective as flâneur of human capital, alive to the traces left by the hidden violence of accumulation, dispossession, and the tyranny of wage labor. Despite many apparent similarities, Conan Doyle's Holmes is not a power manager.¹⁰ Rather, he is a manic-depressive, an affective condition clearly linked to the boom and bust cycles of industrial overproduction that created near-continuous economic instability in the late 1800s. Rather than feeling too little, Holmes feels *too quickly* and *too intensely*. He is affected beyond the acceptable levels by the minutiae of the environment, incorporating many of aspects of the "exalted perception" from which psychical researchers would work so hard to extricate their discourse, as discussed below. While Sherlock often treats his friends and allies as pawns, he does not see them *only* as pawns, as would a power manager.

Like the historical reveries of the flâneur, the connections the Holmesian detective makes are to the past. Holmes does anticipate his adversaries now and then, but doing so is not his focus. Most of Holmes's spectacular feats of cognitive labor involve reconstruction rather than speculative prediction or pre-emption. In fact, in the conclusion of his first adventure, Holmes states his profound disdain for the desire to reason forward:

... the grand thing is to be able to *reason backward*. This is a very useful [power] but people do not practice it much. In the everyday affairs of life it is more useful to reason forward, and so the other comes to be neglected [...]. Most people [...]

¹⁰ Benedict Cumberbatch's version in BBC's *Sherlock* is sometimes figured as a power manager (at least, when it is convenient to the plot), and the character in the recent Guy Ritchie films definitely is one. This retroactive continuity version of the beloved detective is, I would argue, evidence that power management is the distinctive form of real subsumption in our time.

can put events together in their minds and argue from them what will come to pass. (“A Study in Scarlet,” 115-6)

For Holmes, extrapolation and speculation are mundane. The future is a matter of common knowledge; profitable secrets lay in the past. For the power manager of the 20th century, these relations are completely reversed, reflecting the different pressures of subsumption in the age of speculative capital.

On the other hand, Sherlock’s brother Mycroft Holmes and his nemesis Moriarty are both proto-power managers, in that they wield Sherlock’s skills from an affectively cool place of instrumental rationality, and in the fact that their engagement is with the forward-looking speculative labor of strategy and organization. But they are never focalized as imitable protagonists for the reader.

20th century detective fiction mostly follows Sherlock’s focus on working backwards along the traces of the crime, though genre does give us one of the most interesting proto-power managers: the African techno-magician Frimbo in Rudolph Fisher’s *The Conjure-Man Dies: A Tale of Darkest Harlem* (1932), the first African American mystery novel.¹¹ Frimbo’s powers toe the line between Holmesian deduction, technological fantasy, and psychic sensitivity, and, as the next section argues, power management and the paranormal do not mix.

¹¹ The chapter-length expansion of this section in the manuscript will examine *The Conjure-Man Dies* in detail.

0.5.2 The Psychic Mutant

Despite being defined by their extraordinary capacity for cognitive and affective labor, power managers' mental abilities are distinct from the tropes of "mental mutants" in pulp sf, and from the "psychics" and "sensitives" of Victorian psychical research. While finance capital is spectral, power management has no truck with the paranormal. This is both a historical *and* a typological distinction. *Dune*, the first true power management text, developed *out of* these tropes, but it also definitively leaves them behind.

In the tropes of psychic power established by pulp sf and Campbellian sf especially, telepathy and precognition often have the effect of removing the labor from the cognitive feats of the narrative, or at least, of shifting it from a model of skilled labor to one of athletic prowess. The focus is not on technique, but on "mental muscle power," reducing the attention to technique, and to the *mediation* of technique and so to the labor of interpretation, translation, and persuasion. Psychic powers translate "sensitivity" directly into perception, and "mental strength" directly into compulsive effects. Precognition, or "knowing before," tends to have a similar effect on narratives of speculation about the future. The characters' impressions of future events arrive "before cognition" and so, in effect, *without cognitive labor*. They are the product of the senses, rather than a conscious process of speculative extrapolation.¹² Similarly, long-distance telepathic "scanning" and other forms of clairvoyance may serve to dramatize relations of

¹² Phillip K. Dick's short story "The Golden Man" (1953) takes psychic knowledge's disregard for cognition to its logical conclusion.

surveillance, but again, the model of surveillance they offer is one in which the power to think, the power to see, and the power to know are collapsed together, without the need for cognitive labor to mediate the various acts of organization, analysis, interpretation, and speculation required to turn scattered reports into a “map” of the world.

This tendency to *deskill* psychic ability goes back to the earliest Anglophone conceptualizations of “mental power” by the Victorian Society for Psychical Research. As Roger Luckhurst notes in *The Invention of Telepathy*, the paranormal researchers began their investigations by focusing on well-known performers of “mental feats” (56). Many of these professionals—predominantly of lower class backgrounds—were willing to share their methods, but often these turned out to be decidedly material techniques of perception and speculative extrapolation from physical and social cues, what the researchers called “exalted perception” (Luckhurst 63-67)—precisely the forms of secular detection Conan Doyle valorizes in *Sherlock Holmes*. While such cognitive labor is central to the figure of the twenty-first century power manager, for the investigators of the time it was difficult to separate the information performers gleaned from through their own labor from that which was gained through psychic power alone.

This was part of the complex network of factors that led the Society of Psychical Research to shift their focus towards subjects whose abilities could be coded as *passive* rather than *active*, especially middle-class children, who could be represented as pure and without artifice (Luckhurst 68-75). Psychic power, in in the context of such subjects, could be reduced to a “pure” relation of sensitivity and receptivity, on the model of electrical induction and wireless transmission (Luckhurst 75-92). This formulation

entangles psychic ability with Victorian class and gender politics in problematic ways that persisted into 20th century pulp sf and horror. Psychic “force” was a function of (implicitly masculine) ego strength, while psychic receptivity was passive and often very explicitly feminized in practices of mediumship, trance-states and hypnotism, as Luckhurst documents extensively.

Luckhurst’s history also shows how the discourse of psychic power is inseparably linked to theology and mysticism, despite the internecine conflicts between “secular” researchers like the SPR and adherents of Spiritualism, Theosophy, and Hermeticism. The megatext of the paranormal in popular culture that developed *out of* those debates blunts distinction between the participants, so that mystical entities and forces of the “beyond” tend to enter ostensibly secular narratives, and these forces, in turn, tend to resolve into angelic and demonic valences. Of course, one way to cognitively map speculative capital’s combination of spectrality and malevolence is through the imagery of the demonic—Fawaz reads several 1980s story arcs in Marvel’s *X-Men* through this lens. But what kinds of responses, what kind of politics are possible when the spectral forces of capital are apprehended this way? Such spiritual frames tend to reduce political change to rituals of exorcism—“Get behind me, Capital! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God!”¹³ Further, their reliance on the psychic oracle’s mediation between the demos and capital’s “space outside of representation” replicates finance culture’s own ideological belief that the market, as the true space of agency, is accessible only through “a mathematical intuition embodied (as a

¹³ To paraphrase Jesus’s famous rebuke of Satanic influence in Mark 8:33.

quasi-genetic endowment) in those who master financial practices” (LiPuma and Lee 65). When capital is framed as a supernatural force, then we confront it on its own chosen rhetorical battleground.

The trajectory of power management established in *Dune* avoids both the tendency towards deskilling and the problem of spiritualizing capital. With its emphasis on physicality, technique, and extrapolation, *Dune* actually returns to and recovers the earlier tradition of active immaterial labor and “exalted perception” that the Society of Psychical Research worked to purge from the discourse of mental power. Further, while the protagonist Paul is a product of genetic manipulation, and therefore a kind of mutant, possessed of a “mathematical intuition embodied as a quasi-genetic endowment,” the novel fixates on the way that his superhuman capacity for calculation facilitates, rather than supplants, the work of cognitive and affective labor. Paul’s supergenes allow him to do that labor *faster*, but the labor itself remains relatable and imitable—which, as I noted with Holmes above, is an important part of power management’s appeal. Finally, while spectral forces do appear in Paul’s speculative visions, they are firmly grounded as arising from human social forces—and ultimately answerable to them as well.¹⁴ Thus while, as I will document in the next chapter, *Dune* establishes many of the pernicious ideological aspects of power management discourse, it also sets up power management as a uniquely secular cognitive mapping of capital’s spectral power.

¹⁴ While *Dune* itself carefully establishes this secular focus, setting the trajectory for power management, Herbert does not maintain it in his sequels. The third novel, *Children of Dune*, opens the door to ghosts, racial spirits, Jungian archetypes, and cosmic forces, and from that point on the narrative loses any critical usefulness for the kind of socioeconomic analysis perused here. It is not a coincidence that the alt-right’s embrace of *Dune* is more focused on Leto, the protagonist of the third and fourth books, rather than Paul.

0.5.3 The Fast-Talking Hustler

One of the trickiest but most important parts of defining the power manager as a distinct figure in popular culture is separating him from the fast-talker. The fast-talking hero seems to have much in common with the power manager. Both get what they want through manipulation, affective performances, understanding the rational and emotional weaknesses of their “marks,” and tuning their performances to maximize penetration of those weak spots. Both are defined through their resourcefulness and adaptability, and the tensions arising from the way that need for flexibility strains their capacity for intimate relationships.¹⁵

The fast-talker is a longstanding figure, going back beyond entrepreneurial capitalism all the way to Odysseus. Even restricting ourselves to the age of capitalism itself, we can see this figure in popular culture from *Bleak House* (1852-3) to *The Music Man* (1961), and especially in sf, chiefly in the special space agent subgenre from *Stainless Steel Rat* (1957-) to Louis McMaster Bujold’s Vorkosigan saga (1986-).¹⁶

First, I would argue that, while both the fast-talker and the power manager display subjectivities shaped in accordance to the demands of the capitalism of their time, they differ in the matter of *degree*. Like the power manager, the fast-talker has clearly taken

¹⁵ Many signature cons ultimately follow the logic of short-selling and arbitrage. the fast-talker makes fraudulent claim an asset or position, only to and use that claim to accumulate the resources he needs to actually purchase it—at which point he can either enjoy it for itself, or sell it on to realize its capital.

¹⁶ These are memorable examples. There were, of course, hustler narratives before and after these texts.

up the entrepreneurial mandate of capitalism. However, what separates him from the power manager is that while the fast-talker treats others as competing capitals and sources of profit, the power manager treats them *only* as *objects* of competition and exploitation.

Further, if we restrict our view to the trajectory of the fast-talking *protagonist* during the same period that the power manager developed, we can see that they remain fairly distinct.¹⁷ During the years between 1965 and today, fast-talking protagonists have generally been characterized, not by the coldness and hollowness of the power manager, but by an *excess of affect*. They tend to be manic, voluble, and affable. They may be amoral, but they are rarely unfriendly. Their gregariousness overflows their truthfulness. This manic energy and the emotional gratification they receive from “winning” human regard tend to push post-war hustlers into their ever-escalating adventures with prevarication.¹⁸ Eventually, most 20th century hustlers reach a point of crisis, a personal breaking point beyond which they are unable to continue their disingenuous performances of self. Hung up on an ethical shoal, they begin the recuperative project of building, at last, some semblance of a “real” performance of heteromale selfhood.

Miles Vorkosigan, Louis McMaster Bujold’s fast-talker extraordinaire, clearly follows this pattern, and in so doing illustrates the key differences between a masculine

¹⁷ Of course, antagonists and the odd antihero serve as exceptions, but the trend through most of 20th century popular culture is towards sympathetic fast-talkers who are ultimately redeemed. 21st century pop culture sees a boom in the antihero, which I address in Chapter Four.

¹⁸ As improvisers surfing the chaos their own performances create, hustlers do serve as excellent models for thinking the 21st century business model of “disaster capitalism.” Like the Bush administration’s haphazard management of the Iraq occupation, the hustler seeks to create a “new” reality rather than trying to diagnose and master the “current” one.

subject who succeeds by *adapting* to neoliberal rationality, and the power manager, who *adopts* the model of capital as the model of the self. Throughout his lengthy career, Miles fragments his loyalties and affective connections across multiple personae, building a vast portfolio of social capital that he leverages for his own gain. But all of these performances are rooted in real attachments that Miles forms. His diversified portfolio of social capital is still a project of long-term investment, and when push comes to shove Miles regularly puts his own interests at risk to honor his side of those bonds. Similarly, while he often uses his skill at affective manipulation to overawe and confuse his friends and allies to his own advantage, he never reduces those relationships to things, pure instrumental means. Those he subordinates are never only human capital to him, as they are for the power managers I examine here.¹⁹ Throughout Miles's character arc, drama is generated by his attempts to reconcile the situational power afforded by comporting himself as a capital subject, and his desire to maintain an "authentic" heteromascuine identity. As in many hustler narratives, the narrative moments of triumph and redemption come when the needs of masculine affect can be fulfilled: when Miles keeps his word of honor, forms heterosexual (if not always heteronormative) bonds, fulfils his filial obligations, and perpetuates his noble line. The tools of neoliberal finance are his primary tools, but it is his struggle against letting them define him that ultimately defines his narrative—the opposite of the power manager's arc.

¹⁹ Miles is ultimately much closer to Leto Atreides than he is to Paul, and *Dune* is explicitly framed around the idea that Leto's style of masculine heroism is no longer enough, that Paul's power management must supersede him to survive and flourish.

In contrast to the affective “warmth” of the fast talker, which both generates his characteristic crisis of identity and sets the stage for his humanistic redemption, the power manager is defined by a “cold” affect and a hollow interiority. While a power manager will manipulate others to gain buy-in, to invite positive investment and love, they always do so for ends other than personal connection and identity reinforcement. The regard of others is only an instrumental means to other ends. Social interaction is a system to be rationally manipulated, and emotional commitments are impediments to the flexibility and mobility required to achieve maximum efficiency in that market. Ego reinforcement is not a significant factor for the power manager, who either does not need or want it (Batman), gets it from other sources (Dexter), or has intentionally sacrificed access to it in his Faustian bargain for power (Paul Atreides).

This distinction remains clear in the 20th century texts I examine here. However, as I argue in the chapter on Dexter, in the 21st century, once neoliberal governance and finance capital have achieved hegemonic status, this sharp distinction starts to blur. Demystified, robbed of its aura of aspiration, the power manager tends to shift either towards the colder, more desperate hustler figures we see in *Mad Men* (AMC 2009-15), *House of Cards* (Netflix 2013-) or *Nightcrawler* (Gilroy 2014), or towards lighthearted tricksters as in *Psych* (USA 2006-2014)—though in either case, the pernicious connections power management forged among whiteness, mobility, and financial agency remain unchallenged.

0.6 Tracing the Trajectory of Power Management

I examine both how the figure of the power manager evolves, and how his relationship with others changes as neoliberal modes of thought and action emerge into dominance within the larger culture. I look both at the way power managers epitomize the growing power and authority of financial logic in the late 20th century, and the ways that, as a recuperative fantasy of white male power, power management reveals the weaknesses and insecurities of patriarchal culture. Normative masculinity is always a movable feast, expressing both the social challenges to white hetero-patriarchy and its present set of strategies for staying on top. My scholarship here is the work of an ally gathering intelligence that will facilitate more effective resistance to the reactionary strategies of dominant power.

I start with the genesis of power management in Frank Herbert's 1965 novel *Dune*. In Chapter One, I provide a detailed close reading of the science fiction classic, arguing that the bildungsroman of its protagonist, Paul Atreides, is also the narrative of his development as the first power manager. Drawing on Wendy Brown and Randy Martin, I draw extensive parallels between the language of complexity and awareness in *Dune* and the finance ontology of neoliberalism. I also pay close attention to the way that the novel portrays Paul's exceptional consciousness as a hybrid of gender coded forms of immaterial labor, arguing that *Dune* sets the precedent for the way that power management discourse appropriates subordinated peoples' accumulated knowledge of affective labor, which is repackaged as "innovative" managerial technique, from which

women and people of color are excluded. I also read *Dune* as a fantasy of early adoption. Because Paul is the first and only subject within the diegetic world to embrace the atomizing market logic of neoliberalism, he is able to dominate all those clinging to “obsolete” forms of subjectivity and collectivity. Paul remakes society through his financialized neoliberal powers, but that society itself remains stuck in pre-neoliberal relations.

In Chapters Two and Three, I trace the fraught relationship between Batman and the Justice League of America between 1983 and 2001. During this period, DC Comics was rebooting its continuity, and the titles I examine here helped establish that new world as one shaped by the finance ontology of neoliberalism. Not only do Batman’s own subjectivity and heroic performances evolve towards the structure of power management that I identified in *Dune*, but the whole political and social structure of DC’s diegetic world shifts with him. In two 1980s texts I examine, *Batman and the Outsiders* (1983-5) and *Justice League* (1987-8), this process of social subsumption remains incomplete—though financialized approaches to power is portrayed as more *effective* than traditional superheroism, they are also identified as threats to the values of democratic humanism that had dominated the genre since the 1960s. However, in the 1990s texts, *Kingdom Come* (1996) and *JLA* (1997-2001), neoliberal modes of subjectivity and financialized models of agency triumph, becoming the new hegemonic norm for both mundane and superheroic politics and ethics. The subsumption of the DC universe is complete. To understand the shifting relationship between superpowered subjects and popular political agency in these texts, I draw on Wendy Brown’s articulation of responsabilization and

Gijs Van Oenen's theorization of interpassivity. Both, I argue, work to undermine our ability to conceive of ourselves, individually or collectively, as capable of political action within the bounds of capitalist realism. One result is of this feeling of "reflexive impotence," as Mark Fisher calls it, is a longing for autarchic, superpowered figures who can produce the results that neither we, nor our deadlocked partisan politics, seem to be able to create. This leads, on one hand, to the proliferation of technocratic, Third Way style policy at the level of state, and on the other hand to the desire for larger than life heroes in both entertainment and the reality entertainment our politics have become. My reading of the evolution of the DC Universe exposes how power management discourse has and continues to feed into this anti-democratic sentiment, and to the broader normalization of neoliberal relations in both public and private life.

In Chapter Three, I argue that *JLA* marks Neoliberalism's passage from emergence into dominance, the point at which its demands on the subject are no longer aspirational, but simply normal. To shape the self as a capital project is no longer a science fictional enterprise. This presents a challenge to the trajectory of power management that developed in 20th century science fiction and heroic fantasy. As the language and ideology of finance ontology—which power management had crystalized in aspirational form—increasingly appeared in the official language of corporations and the state, power management stopped being something for the individual subject to aspire towards, and became something that we had to *deal with*: manipulative bosses, intrusive surveillance, the indiscriminate deployment of "smart" weapons in increasingly dirty and illogical wars. In Chapter Four I examine how, in response to the normalization and

institutionalization of the neoliberal capacities of power management, the *figure* of the power manager migrated from the otherworldly spaces of sf and superheroic to the ostensible realism of television drama. While these genres of popular fantasy negotiate social tensions differently than the extrapolative speculation of sf, they are uniquely able to register the sense of *proximity* and *pressure* neoliberal rationality puts on the subject from its position of hegemonic dominance.

I focus on the first season of AMC's 2006 procedural thriller *Dexter*, examining how it portrays its sociopathic protagonist as inhabiting a subjectivity dangerously close to our own. I choose *Dexter* as an exemplary text not only because it effectively shows how the "diminished" power manager of the 21st century compares to his superheroic predecessors, but because I see it as a key transitional text, in which the figure of the power manager that crystallizes in *Dune* melts back into air. *Dexter* displays the normalization of the impersonal market relations of capital by constantly hailing the viewer as a potential power manager. "Look how much easier it is," *Dexter* croons through its writing, cinematography, and design, "look how serene you can be if you don't care, when you are only capital, when others are only objects and opponents." Part of the enjoyment afforded by the show is flirting with your own subsumption. Yet, at the same time, bringing the power manager down to earth, as *Dexter* does, makes explicit his dependence on the scripts and privileges of normative whiteness and heteropatriarchy. While the protagonist Dexter both relies on and retrenches the cultural power of whiteness and maleness, *Dexter* does more complex ideological work, mapping the

precariousness of that privilege in the and increasingly diverse and cosmopolitan world, exposing possible lines of resistance and attack.

The overall trajectory of power management is I trace in Chapters One through Four is grim, mapping out the subsumption of individuality and community, politics and pleasure, until, in *Dexter*, it might seem that Mark Fisher is right that capitalist realism now “seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable” (8). In my final chapter, I resist the pull of left melancholia that would throw up its hands and admit that all is lost, by identifying possibilities for resistance and radical imagination that lie within the trajectory of power management itself. Drawing on the queer utopian aesthetics of José Esteban Muñoz and the accelerationist aesthetics of Steven Shaviro, I give an extended close reading of Iain M. Banks’s *The Player of Games* (1988). Combining archival research with theoretical explication, I trace the novel’s process of revision from its first manuscript form in 1979, through to its publication, arguing that the resulting text is indelibly marked with its moment—the emergence of neoliberalism, of Thatcher and Reagan, of the Moral Majority and “there is no alternative.”

In response to this rapidly shifting sociopolitical environment, Banks crafts a text that doesn’t simply *refuse* the logics of financial speculation and domineering masculinity that were rampaging through the West, upending the liberal humanist ideals of the welfare state. Instead, he *accelerates them*, pushing them to their breaking point. In the process, I argue, Banks imagines how a subjectivity and sociality defined by an aesthetic experience of queer cultivation might disentangle the pernicious ideology of toxic masculinity and market competition from the technologies of speculation that drive

the late capitalist economy. *The Player of Games* maps out route, however tenuous, towards a world in which the same tools of finance and surveillance that the elite are using to wreck our world are not seized or destroyed, but *freed* and made our allies, so that we could cultivate a better, more equal and abundant world.

Chapter One
Prototyping Power Management:
Frank Herbert's *Dune* and the Financialization of Heroic Masculinity

Frank Herbert's 1965 novel *Dune* is useful for thinking our financialized late capitalist moment, and the concepts and concerns of our current moment are useful for re-thinking this SF classic. As a conscious reading strategy, such anachronism brings seemingly disparate elements of the novel which critics tend to treat separately (ecology, gender, heroism, politics, prophesy, colonialism) into productive new conjunctions. Herbert's novel poses these heterogeneous overt concerns within a frame of radical austerity, and by positing complexity awareness and computational consciousness as the key avenues of extrapolated innovation in the face of that austerity, *Dune* thinks a set of factors quite similar to those that transformed global capitalism in the second half of the 20th century. In *Dune*'s protagonist Paul Atreides, we see these threads woven together to form a problematic masculine subjectivity that exemplifies capacities of risk-management and affective manipulation central to the emerging postindustrial financial market system. The result is as an early prototype for the exemplary neoliberal subject that would emerge into dominance twenty-odd years later.

Reading *Dune* through the frameworks of immaterial labor and financial capital serves to unsettle sedimented interpretations of the novel, and to illustrate its continuing relevance within late capitalist neoliberalism. Paul's exceptional consciousness is a model for the financialized subjectivity demanded by postindustrial laboring practices. Tracing the fraught gender dynamics surrounding Paul's heroic capacities in the novel

helps us map anxieties surrounding the reproduction of labor suitable for the knowledge and service economy today. We can draw on the connections the novel makes between Paul Atreides's ascent to power and the transformation of his subjectivity in order to think the sociopathic, instrumental anti-heroism that has risen to such prominence in our contemporary popular and corporate cultures.

1.1 Financializing *Arête*

Central to my reading of *Dune* as a metaphor for the reification of subjectivity in late capitalism is of the emergence of neoliberalism as a governing rationality, as documented by Wendy Brown, Randy Martin, Mark Fisher, and others. These new forms of neoliberal power, in turn, assume/demand new forms of elite subjectivity. This in turn leads to a new form of neoliberal fantasy figure perfectly in sync with the new regimes of power. I call this figure the power manager, and in *Dune* we see one of its earliest and most influential incarnations. Carefully examining how Paul must hollow out his self to activate his financialized powers can help us think "neoliberalism's hollowing out of contemporary liberal democracy and its imperiling of more radical democratic imaginaries" (Brown, 18).

Within power management fantasies, then, all spheres of interaction become sites of strategic maneuvering, fronts in an ever widening speculative arms race where each tries to anticipate and preempt all others. Paul's exceptional consciousness brings complexity, perception, and flexibility together to exercise precisely the kind of speculative power Martin identifies. An epigraph near the middle of *Dune* asks of Paul's prescient abilities:

How much is actual prediction [...] and how much is the prophet shaping the future to fit the prophecy? [...] Does the prophet see the future, *or does he see a line of weakness, a fault or cleavage that he may shatter with words or decisions as a diamond-cutter shatters his gem with a blow of a knife?* (277, my emphasis).¹

If one perceives reality as a field of tipping points, controlling the future is a matter of knowing precisely when to tweak them. The more nuanced and instantaneous one's awareness of those variables, the better a timely small investment can be leveraged for considerable gains. Power management is the agonistic deployment of such awareness: one's multiplication of gain is directly proportional to the extent to which one's apprehension of a system is sharper and faster than one's competitors. This opportunistic complexity awareness corresponds to the neoliberal market logic Brown and Martin identify.

The financialized fantasy of speculative power conditions almost every aspect of *Dune* and provides the connecting structure that weaves together the various (often seemingly contradictory) discourses in the novel. Power management is the implicit answer to the questions *Dune* overtly poses. Every form of interaction becomes an opportunity to profit from disparities in knowledge and flexibility. From the length of a glance or the phrasing of a word, to the footwork of the duelist and the policies of state, best practice—heroic *arête*—is marked not by an enlargement of one's ability to project force, but by a cultivated awareness of complexity that allows one to leverage the

¹ These epigraphs must be taken with some salt—something only literary biographers O'Reilly and Touponce have carefully considered. Epigraphs like this one, which ostensibly demystify Paul's heroic persona, are often conspicuous performances of the reflexive perspicuity at the core of that persona.

smallest investment of resources for the greatest effect.² In keeping with financialized discourse, Paul's cultivation as a heroic protagonist in *Dune* involves maximizing his mobility, flexibility, and perspicuity, so that he can produce whatever response—physical, political, or affective—best leverages the strategic opportunities of the moment. The favored terrain for establishing dominance shifts away from “manly” feats of arms towards diplomacy and persuasion, and even to “feminine” spheres of beguilement and seduction. While the martial aptitudes of traditional heroism remain *de rigueur* in *Dune*, skills of personnel management, risk assessment, and resource allocation take pride of place. In its obsessive focus on social and political maneuvering, *Dune* provides an ideal space for Paul to play out both the powers and the pitfalls of neoliberal power management fantasy.

1.2 Literacies of Complexity

The novel's ideal of perfect effectivity—reframing *every* interaction with the goal of exploiting unequal knowledge of complex systems to dominance the present so completely as to control the future—requires Paul to master each of the mental disciplines of selfhood and power within the novel. The first step to reading Paul's cultivated consciousness as a model for financialized subjectivity is to parse these mental disciplines, marking the differences in how they allow their initiates to experience the

² The 1984 film adaptation jettisons most of the novel's connections to the logic of modern finance. To render *Dune*'s “weirding ways” visually, Lynch's film opts for “weirding modules,” sci-fi rayguns that replace the novel's subtle dynamics of perception, leverage, and redirection with a simple enlargement and projection of force. Similarly, the Bene Gesserit's sophisticated techniques of affective perception are reduced to a magical telepathy.

world as a web of minute but pivotal differences, tensions, and interconnections whose effects cascade in chaotic but still calculable ways.

As Donald Palumbo notes, there are extensive parallels between the language of “tipping points” and “turbulence” in *Dune* and the terminology of complexity theory in science and mathematics (*Chaos Theory*, 149-51).³ The specialized literacies of complexity in the novel are speculative (Mentat), ecological (Fremen), and affective (Bene Gesserit). Each allows its initiates to experience the world as a web of minute but pivotal differences and interconnections, whose effects cascade in chaotic but still calculable ways. Integrating these literacies into his consciousness, Paul becomes a cyborg specialized for cognitive and immaterial labor.⁴ Paul’s hybrid literacy extends his awareness of nuance-as-opportunity from the global level of ecology to the micro-politics within the scene of interaction, and from grasping the present to capturing the future.

“Mentat” has become a kind of shorthand used by fans and critics alike to describe exceptional subjectivity and complexity awareness in *Dune*, as though the term wholly encompassed the disparate ecological, political, and interpersonal *techne* on

³ In making these connections to Chaos Theory, Palumbo draws mainly on popular accounts of these disciplines’ development, such as Gleick’s 1987 *Chaos: Making a New Science* and Briggs and Peat’s 1989 *Turbulent Mirror*.

⁴ In the novel’s universe, human experience is purged of interaction with digital technology. As a result, *Dune*’s exploration of reified consciousness draws on the logic of computerization and discourse of cybernetics but without the haptic and somatic interpenetration of flesh and circuitry so central to most cyborg discourse. This focus on purely mental rather than physical and technological augmentation differs in important ways from the influential accounts of cybernetic subjectivity by Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles, and from the concerns of “cybernetic literature” as described by David Porush.

display in the novel.⁵ Indeed, the novel is often taken as a “training manual” for developing such a Mentat consciousness.⁶ Yet the different factions in *Dune* perform distinct forms of immaterial labor, and careful reading reveals the “chaos theory” literacy Palumbo documents is mostly articulated and performed by the Bene Gesserit and by Paul. The Mentats reproduce the operations of the computer—memorization and analysis of data, the collation, analytical calculation, and speculative extrapolation of pre-existing, disembodied information (*Dune* 11-2, 18, 523). In contrast, the Bene Gesserit specialize not in abstraction, but in the nuanced perception and production of affects *within* social interaction (5, 6, 53-54, 62, etc.).

Readers’ tendency to over-value the Mentats’ importance despite the facts of the text replicates gendered hierarchies in the real world, which continue to value the masculine-coded abstract labor of computation above “feminized” affective and service labor.⁷ Taking the Mentats’ masculine-identified discipline as the master discourse of the novel also obscures the critical question of who can apply such knowledge of complexity

⁵ A good example is the subtitle to Jeffery Nicholas’s *Dune and Philosophy: The Weirding Way of the Mentat*, a portmanteau that annexes the Bene Gesserit techne wholesale.

⁶ This widely used label is often attributed to Herbert himself, but the most likely real origin is the opening chapter of O’Reilly’s *Frank Herbert*, whose final sentence reads “One could say [Herbert’s novels] are training manuals for exactly the kinds of awareness they describe.”

⁷ The masculine-coded, abstract, intellectual labor of computation not only pays better than feminized affective and service labor, but also tends to dominate theoretical accounts of immaterial labor. While Hardt and Negri remind readers that “the affective labor of human contact and interaction [...] extends well beyond the model of intelligence and communication defined by the computer” (*Empire* 292-3), in their own usages of the term “immaterial” reference to computational labor outnumber affective labor at least 2:1.

in real time within their embodied performances. In *Dune*, there is not only the matter of *seeing* that complexity exists, but seeing it as *creating opportunity* in the moment.⁸

The Mentat discipline does not augment Hawat's perception of affect nor extend his range of performance in the manner of the "the Bene Gesserit way," nor does it allow him to analyze situations in real time. Hawat struggles to communicate across cultural differences with a Fremen companion despite his belief that "Mentat training was supposed to give a man the power to see motives" (208). Perhaps Mentats have the power to deduce motives from compiled or reported data, as a profiler might; but Hawat's powers fail when confronted with a live interlocutor whose "word-sounds were not being linked up" in what he considered "the normal manner" (210). Hawat's focus on the words exchanged stands in stark contrast to Jessica's navigation of a similarly fraught encounter with the Fremen Shadout Mapes earlier in the novel. Rather than rely solely on the abstract content of the words, as Hawat does, Jessica "read the more obvious signs in Mapes's actions and appearance, the petit betrayals" revealed by Jessica's "deep training of alertness that exposed meaning in the most casual muscle twitch" (53, 55).

In these scenes the Mentats' sheer computational power is clearly and unfavorably distinguished from the reflexive self-consciousness displayed by Paul and the Bene Gesserit affective literacies displayed by Jessica. The Mentats' computational power is optimized for planning, not doing, and while the schemes they hatch are

⁸ In *The Future as Cultural Fact*, Arjun Appadurai makes a similar distinction while discussing the place of risk in 21st century finance: "the world of financial risk... is a technology for the mapping and measuring of risk, not to manage it but rather to *exploit* it" (240, emphasis in original).

intricate, they are not necessarily “complex” in the senses of nonlinearity or dynamic contingency.⁹ Yet the Mentat philosophy of analysis and planning—their ideological relation to their own ability—scarcely recognizes this limitation.

Analyzing “the First Law of the Mentat” as it appears and functions in the text clarifies Mentats’ relation to their own ideologies of power, highlights a major site of reader confusion, and leads us into the discussion ecological and political discourses of complexity in the novel. The First Law of the Mentat states that “a process cannot be understood by stopping it. Understanding must move with the flow of the process, must join it and flow with it” (32). It is widely quoted by critics and fans alike as a clear statement of the text’s overall ecological critique of industrial rationality.¹⁰ The Law is also presumed to form the foundation of Paul’s early, aborted Mentat training—and thus of his reconstituted subjectivity. Yet close reading of the First Law’s appearance in the text unsettles these assumptions, showing instead that Paul and Hawat either fail to understand the Law’s ecological and ideological implications, or else refuse to apply them either to their own power relations or to the specificities of Arrakis.

The Law comes up early in the novel, in the scene where Thufir Hawat first appears (28-32). In the course of a discussion about the environmental hazards of

⁹ Both Pieter’s plot—which ultimately kills Duke Leto and drives Paul and Jessica into the desert—and the gladiatorial gambit Hawat devises for Feyd-Rautha involve taking risks, but don’t really *leverage* that risk, and neither is described using the vocabulary of “tipping points” and “turbulence” Palumbo associates with chaos theory in the novel.

¹⁰ In an interview with Willis McNelly, Herbert described the industrial logic he sought to critique in *Dune* as “cynical abstraction [...] linear pragmatism [...] the idea that we can overcome nature by a mathematical means; we accumulate enough data and we subdue it [...] all you need for any problem is enough force, power, and that there is no problem which won’t submit to this approach, even our own ignorance.”

Arrakis, a puzzled Paul recounts part of his encounters with the Bene Gesserit Reverend Mother—which have dominated the opening of the novel up to that point (3-13, 22-27)—in which she admonishes the young noble that Arrakis demands a model of rulership beyond that practiced by Duke Leto. The Reverend Mother’s argument that Paul must make “the art of ruling” an object of a “science” that will teach “to persuade and not to compel” (30-1).¹¹ While, as Hawat points out, the Atrides style of rule uses persuasion and love to bind Leto’s inner circle of retainers, the Reverend Mother points beyond Leto’s commitment to a romanticized *comitatus*-style homosociality towards a form of sovereignty that *adapts itself* to the relationships the ecosystems enforce among their participants. “She said a good ruler must learn his world’s language ... [that of] the rocks and growing things [For such a ruler] life isn’t a problem to solve, but a reality to be experienced” (31). It is in this moment—where ecology, as a literacy, is offered up as a critique of the Atrides’ imperialistic status quo—that the First Law is invoked by Paul:

I quoted the First Law of the Mentat at her: “A process cannot be understood by stopping it. Understanding must move with the flow of the process, must join it and flow with it. That seemed to satisfy her. (31-2, my emphasis)

The way that Paul hurls the Law “at” her like a projectile reveals the defensiveness in Paul’s invocation of one familiar model of masculine mastery (Mentat computation) in defense of another (his father’s imperial sovereignty). Any rebuttal the Reverend Mother might have made is cut off by this reassertion of Mentat expertise on the subject, and

¹¹ Neither is open to the Reverend Mother’s argument. This recollection is framed both by Paul’s loyalty to his patrilineage, and by Thufir’s unswerving contempt for the Bene Gesserit. Throughout the novel, Hawat’s thoughts are full of snipes at Paul’s “witch-mother” and her “precious school.” Speaking with Paul, he refers to the Reverend Mother as a “witch-spy” and sarcastically asks what ideas “spouted from this ancient font of wisdom.” In the working drafts, Hawat is even more overt, “outraged” by Bene Gesserit concepts which he judges to be intentionally confusing “mishmash.”

Paul's assertion that "she seemed satisfied" is clearly suspect, meaning only that she didn't press him further. The Law's awkward use to silence her challenge exposes exactly how much more nuanced and reflexive her position was. Indeed, The Reverend Mother's argument about ecology and power was at best analogous to the First Law *as principle*, turning instead on embodiment in practice. The letter of the Mentat ideology is thus used to cover over the troubling implications of its spirit, both by Paul and more insistently by Hawat.

The language of separation and opposition in the rest of Paul and Hawat's conversation displays their disregard for the principles of understanding, adaption, and persuasion the Reverend Mother articulated. Hawat's discussion of the impending annexation of Arrakis and its people emphasizes "the importance of [regarding] the planet as an enemy" (30) posing "special problems" (29) for the usual mechanisms of power—problems which the Mentat meets as a series of challenges to be sectioned off and disposed of in a process of taming and pacification.¹² For Hawat, the planet's mysteries are exactly a problem to solve, and the most effective means for the imposition of existing Atreides colonial structures onto the planet is the sole acceptable solution. In Hawat's goals—conscripting the Fremen into House Atreides's current imperial intrigues, incorporating the spice wealth into the existing balance of power—the fruits of Arrakeen difference on the periphery are incorporated into the unchanged politics of the

¹² The Harkonnens, too, claimed to have "tamed Arrakis" (21). This basic structure of their relationship to the planet isn't altered by the fact that the Atreides practice a more benign and diplomatic form of exploitation than the Harkonnens. Further, Pieter and Hawat's roles in that exploitation are so structurally analogous that, when Pieter dies, Hawat slips seamlessly into his place within the Harkonnen organization.

galactic center. The Atreides, their methods, and their imperial ambitions are not variables in Thufir's analysis, they are constants. The Atreides *identity* is to be shielded as much as possible from the necessity of modification. Similarly, his own Mentat approach, and its orientation of the observer/analyst in a particular relation to the object of study, are not themselves objects of analysis or subjects of reform or innovation. Thus, in his plan for the Atreides takeover of Arrakis, Hawat isn't joining or flowing with complexities, but containing and subordinating them.

Here, the methodology of Mentat analysis and its place in the mechanism of power are clear. Their projection of data into a possible present and a speculative future is also always the projection of the current structures of power, the magnification of their minds the magnification of coercive power for the regimes that employ them. In this crucial interaction, the Mentats' subjectivity, and by extension the Imperial power structures their analytical powers bolster, are themselves diagnosed as *exemplifying* the very logics of "linear pragmatism" whose interrogation is taken by most readers to be the purpose of the First Law (and thus the novel as a whole).¹³ "Mentat thinking," then, clearly cannot describe any critical outcome for the reader of this "manual of consciousness," nor can it be a label for the subjectivity Paul develops in the course of the narrative. In this early conversation Paul's allegiance to Hawat and to Mentat categories marks, not his debt to or fundamental identity with Mentats, but rather how far

¹³ The Mentats' combination of computational and strategic functions can also be read as an allusion to the "Civilian Militants," a group of academics who gained influence within national security discourse in the long 1950s through their seductive combination of industrial computing, game theory, and rationalization of the charismatic martial tradition. See Horowitz's *The War Game: Studies of the New Civilian Militants* and Edwards's *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America*.

he has yet to travel in his development away from Hawat towards the Reverend Mother's perspective as the narrative unfolds.¹⁴

The Mentat way is ultimately a passive exercise of speculative extrapolation, which targets the abstractly possible, with few provisions for turning that speculation into immediate experience and action. They lack the reflexive awareness and situational flexibility to leverage their extrapolated knowledge in the moment. As such they belong to the imaginary of industrial planning, rather than the financialized logic of speculative investment. Mentat power alone is not enough for achieving the power management fantasy of dominating the future by mastering the complexities of the present.

It is only by combining the Mentats' capacity for extrapolation with the embodied literacies of the Bene Gesserit and the Fremen that Paul becomes "more than Mentat" (187, 241), and equal to the demands of power management. Yet in order to fuse these disciplines into a composite literacy of perception and performance, Paul must extract (?) their moral and philosophical contents. He separates each faction's *means* to power from the *ends* they were intended to further: stripped of ideological context, these literacies of complexity are distilled into a tool of domination.

Yet Paul must submit himself to a similar process of ethical dissolution to attain the flexible interiority required to wield this weaponized discourse effectively. Within neoliberalism, Brown argues, "we are no longer creatures of moral autonomy... we no

¹⁴ It may seem ironic, then, that the novel's climax finds Paul embracing Hawat and denouncing Moheim. Yet as I will argue, Paul's appropriation of the Bene Gesserit's literacy involves the stripping out of its original goals, values, and taboos. Paul's animosity, then, is an assertion of his ultimate mastery and subsumption of their literacy.

longer choose our ends or the means to them” (42). Because neoliberalism eschews any reference to a “higher nature [it recognizes] no motivations, drives, or aspirations apart from economic ones [...] Neoliberalism is the rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity” (44). Carefully examining how Paul must hollow out his self to activate his financialized powers can help us think the way that neoliberal hollows out civil society and our ability to imagine radical alternatives (Brown, 18). In the tragic arc of *Dune*’s narrative, in which Paul surrenders his personal morality and intentionality in order to wield the financialized tools of power management against his enemies, the cultural tragedy of neoliberalism Brown identifies is rearticulated through the traditionally masculine generic tropes of heroic fantasy.

1.3 Ecological Literacy and/as Power

This section examines how ecology functions as a literacy of complexity in *Dune*, comparing Paul’s practice of that literacy to that of his mentors in it, the Fremen leaders Pardot and Liet Kynes.¹⁵ Ecology functions as a literacy of power in the novel precisely because it is a language of complexity, revealing the world as a dynamic, interconnected system of critical thresholds and tipping points. This awareness of complexity is the foundation of Pardot’s and Paul’s performance of political power in the novel. Both Paul and Pardot use ecological language to articulate their sovereign projects as leaders of the Fremen within the logic of power management: both rule through appeals to speculative

¹⁵ It is easy to conflate Pardot Kynes with his son Liet. Appendix I (*Dune* 493-500), which addresses the elder Kynes’s rise to leadership among the Fremen, reveals Liet’s actions are but an extension of the systemic intervention Pardot initiated—until Liet’s allegiance is “torn from him” by Paul’s affective technique (224).

futures, and for both leveraging control over key variables to effect systemic change is central to realizing their speculative vision. Careful attention to the differences in their use of ecological language in these projects, though, shows how Paul's appropriation of ecological literacy empties it of ethical and political content and reduces it to instrumentalized technique, performing the "militarization of all manner of policy" Martin argues is inherent in financialized, neoliberal modes of governance ("War at All Costs," 14).

I look to ecology first not only because it serves as the discourse of complexity *par excellence* in the novel, but also because as the most central and obvious of Herbert's concerns, it has been the primary object of attention and interpretation by fans and critics alike. Thus, it provides an opportunity to demonstrate how approaching the novel through the lens of financialization can shake up some of the common sense regarding the novel and its relevance to our contemporary moment. The ecological thrust of the novel was central to *Dune's* initial reception, especially its embrace by left countercultures. Even today readers who excoriate other aspects of *Dune's* politics and gender ideology still frame it as attempting a progressive pedagogy in conservation ecology. Yet a close reading of ecological consciousness, and the uses to which it is put in in *Dune*, reveals that the novel's progressive ecological impulses are systematically undermined by the logic of power management, co-opted into Paul's cynical Imperial project.¹⁶

¹⁶ The text's many voices and viewpoints are regularly conflated into a larger 'environmental message' the novel is taken to impart. Even a scholar as careful and insightful as Touponce argues the novel is intended to allow readers to get past "ideological positions" in order to "*feel* the idea of ecology" (32-3), without

Before we can consider ecology's political function as a literacy, we must acknowledge how the ecology of Arrakis makes its own arguments, taking Hobbesian invocations of nature's cruelty to new extremes. If "God created Arrakis to train the faithful" (309, 488), its barely habitable desert instills the lessons of the Chicago school monetarists: the tough love of recession and austerity.¹⁷ Paul's acclimation to "brutal necessities" (495) of Fremen culture—intense competition, casual murder, and self-cannibalization—purges his "softness" (111). The ecological gloss of "adaptation" naturalizes this re-masculinization as a prerequisite for legitimate rule, undercutting Herbert's larger critique of authoritarian heroism in the novel.

Against this backdrop of neoliberalism as natural law, the text explicitly frames the human discipline of ecology as an agonistic literacy of critique and intervention: "a new language that *arms the mind* to manipulate the entire landscape [and] to break through all ideas of force into the dazzling awareness of order" (493, my emphasis). Ecology is a tool for grasping and exploiting chaos to enforce one's chosen patterns—the work of neoliberal power management. Thus, the stylized austerity of the setting and the framing of ecology as a discourse of mastery both complicate Herbert's progressive ecological and political critiques.

really considering how such a separation mirrors the ethical hollowing-out Paul effects on discourses throughout the novel.

¹⁷ The influential "Chicago School of economic thought, best known for producing Milton Friedman, Alan Greenspan, and the fascist Pinochet regime, developed at the University of Chicago in the 1940s, but gained prominence in the 1970s for its attacks on Keynesian monetary policy. A form of market fundamentalism, it prescribes neo-classical *laissez-faire* policies to foster "perfect markets." History shows that in practice, this leads to "shock doctrines," austerity, and authoritarianism.

As rulers, Pardot Kynes and Paul both shape the Fremen culture using their ecological literacy. For Kynes, ecological principles determine the *ends* of rulership. In contrast Paul's ecological literacy—stripped of those principles and reduced to a body of technique—is deployed instrumentally as *means* to another end. Kynes aimed to alter the *whole natural ecosystem* of Arrakis itself. Therefore, though Kynes exercised absolute power over the Fremen, he sought to harness them as “an ecological and geological force” (493) productive over a long term. In contrast, Paul sought to alter *his own place* within the sociopolitical ecosystem of empire, so he cultivated the Fremen as a military or political tool, rapidly developed for immediate use.¹⁸ Critical focus on the physical and social scale of Paul's and Kynes's interventions—manipulating a whole culture, a whole planet—has obscured the very different scales of time these disparate goals demand, and in turn the structures of sociopolitical power they must cultivate among their subjects.

Kynes's plan is ecological leveraging on a massive scale. Surveying the holistic complexity of Arrakis, he discovers that the Fremen need not openly challenge their imperial colonizers and wrest control of the entire planet to carry out their revolutionary project of ecological transformation.¹⁹ Only three percent of Arrakis's surface need be held to capture the crucial tipping points needed to leverage the system over into

¹⁸ This distinction is easily overlooked, particularly in discussions that focus on the Fremen capacity for violence. Both Pardot and Paul encourage a kind of religious violence in support of their projects. But while Fremen militancy is merely one tool in Kynes's generational vision, for Paul it is not a means but precisely the object of his engagement with them. Jessica: “An entire culture trained to military order. What a precious thing to an outcast Duke!” (288); Paul: “I must hold control over these people” (405).

¹⁹ The Fremen have de facto control over most of the planet's surface, but Kynes's 3% calculation allows for most of that territory to form a vast buffer zone, concealing their work from the imperial occupation government.

sustaining life instead of spice.²⁰ As promised, in Kynes's ecological vision, recourse to force is superseded by awareness of systemic order. But Kynes's plan to leverage the system towards a green Arrakis demands a project spanning generations. The culture Kynes forges among the Fremen, then, is not a structure he is to direct from the top, but rather a self-perpetuating social system that will extend beyond his own lifetime, independent of and insulated from the unpredictable conflicts of the imperial economy and its apparatus of planetary governance. Kynes thus applies his absolute power to critical points in Arrakis's natural *and* cultural networks, tipping *both* systems into self-catalyzing motion. His own position of power becomes perfunctory by design: the titular ruler need only "watch and nudge and spy upon" he unsuspecting colonial elites in the capital, ensuring the time and space needed to let the reaction spread.²¹

Kynes's project subordinates ecological literacy's means (the manipulation of complexity also associated with neoliberal financialization) to ecological principles (moral/aesthetic values of sustainability, growth, mutual responsibility). The social organization Kynes erects is not highly organized and centralized, but decentralized, "small-unit," with "regular interchange of data" (495). What emerges is neither corporate management nor representative democracy. An optimistic leftist might read the resulting

²⁰ Beyond the OPEC parallels usually discussed by critics, spice is also a model for the speed-up of the analytical, predictive, and communicational functions necessary for some informative operations, as well as the machinations of post-industrial finance.

²¹ While under Kynes the Fremen project doesn't rely on imperial assistance, it does involve their increasing infiltration into and surveillance of the imperial machinery on Arrakis. Terraforming was done with pilfered Imperial technology, and "no man arrived on Arrakis without a dossier making its way into Fremen hands" (494-5).

Fremen social order as a distributed-production version of the Worker Owned Enterprise strategy espoused by Marxist economists like Richard D. Wolff, David F. Ruccio, and Stephen Cullenberg. Yet we can also see the emerging outline of the late-capitalist systems of neoliberal “governance,” in which “centralized authority, law, policing, rules, and quotas are replaced by networked, team-based, practice oriented techniques emphasizing incentivization, guidelines, and benchmarks” (*Undoing* 34). Brown argues that while such practices are not “by nature neoliberal... neoliberalism has both mobilized and increasingly saturated” their implementation (*Undoing* 122).

The illegibility of this distributed system of governance to the imperial power structure is the reason Kynes’s “ecological Fremen” (*Dune* 500) remain, in the Emperor’s sneering terms, “barbarians whose dearest dream is to live outside the ordered security” of the imperial socioeconomic order (78), even as they quietly revolutionize that order from within.²² The loaded term “barbarian” captures the vexed position of the Fremen *as Paul finds them*. Still in the midst of the shift Kynes initiated, they register as both economic revolutionaries, anarchists engaged in covert counterhegemonic struggle, *and* as stylized neoliberal competitors red in tooth and claw. Paul upends that tension, co-opting the Fremen’s transformation and pushing them emphatically into the latter role.

In stark contrast to the regimes of Pardot and his son Liet, Paul’s deployment of the ecological literacy he learns among the Fremen doesn’t impel him towards left-radical

²² The Emperor here shares with Baron Harkonnen and other Imperial elites—as well as many critics who have approached the novel through a traditional Marxian lens—the assumption that the Fremen must either form a lumpen proletariat or represent abject savagery. That they could self-organize a parallel productive order is simply unthinkable.

projects of environmental renewal, sustainable economics, or decentralized political cooperation.²³ Taking up the ecological literacy of the Fremen, Paul repudiates any sense of responsibility to the web of interdependence. Stripped of its environmental ethics, ecology becomes a conceptual metaphor, a transportable model of complexity that extends across the economic and political fields. In *Dune* ecology “arms the mind,” and Paul deploys his weaponized ecological literacy precisely to find and exploit the tipping points that would propagate his power throughout the Fremen social system, thus projecting a deeper and more complete biopolitical control.

A full third of the novel (277-477) chronicles Paul’s deft maneuvering to assume the very position of centralized, absolute power that Kynes worked to supersede. Upon his adoption into Stilgar’s tribe, stepping for the first time into a sietch and experiencing the inner workings of Fremen culture, Paul orients himself “by postulating an ecology of ideas and values” (346). He uses his understanding of this “ecology” of Fremen culture to style himself as the realization of their deepest desires. As a result of these carefully tuned performances, the Fremen “misrecognize” Paul’s personal Imperial goals as their own. The result is a kind of “hostile takeover” of the Fremen imaginary: Paul leverages his immersion in and charismatic seduction of Stilgar’s tribe—less than 0.3% of the Fremen population—into control of the whole people. Paul’s hostile takeover of the Fremen’s social system induces them to abandon both Kynes’s vision of long-term

²³ Indeed, there is little evidence that Paul has any personal stake or interest in a green Arrakis. On this score he is quite clear: his pledge to use the power of a captured throne to “make a paradise of Arrakis [...] is the coin I offer [Kynes and the Fremen for] support” (224).

environmental leveraging, and the ecological and political ideals that underlay it. He promises a “shortening of the way” to their dream of a green Arrakis precisely through a return to the techniques of conquest by force.

Dune, then, is indeed a “handbook of environmental awareness”: it thinks hard about the consequences of “knowing” a place and its people in the most intimate detail.²⁴ But Paul fashions these *techne* of “knowing” into instrumental means of power-over. “Knowing” the Arrakeen environment, discovering the secret of its interrelations and systems, and how its demands shape the culture of its inhabitants, allows Paul to upend the very balances—both of the landscape and its people—that the novel foregrounds and valorizes. Paul’s integration of the manipulative toolset of ecological literacy with the domineering, subordinating drive of the sovereign allows him to win the secrets of the world and the loyalty of its people, receiving them as gifts freely given. This gifted knowledge becomes the ground for an ineluctable control he turns back upon the very ones who bestowed it. This is, indeed, a perfect execution of the advice the Reverend Mother gives to Paul at the opening of the novel: rule by seduction and desire rather than the knife—though no less absolutely (30-1).

²⁴ In *Dreamer of Dune*, Brian Herbert describes the label “ecological handbook” as a fan coining, pervasive in countercultural reviews of the novel, specifically in the 1969 *Whole Earth Catalog*. While the novel was listed in the Community section of the *Catalog* from 1968-9, its accompanying text read “The metaphor is ecology. The theme is revolution.” The *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* correctly ascribes this label to Herbert himself, who called *Dune* an “environmental awareness handbook” in 1970’s *New World or No World*. Given his propensity to recycle aphorisms, it’s possible the phrase appeared earlier in interviews, talks, or conversation and spread through fandom from there, or that Herbert himself picked it up from reading reviews.

Paul's rulership-as-power management relies on a literacy of complexity that is productive as well as perceptive. Paul's capture of the Fremen imaginary demands he integrate Fremen ecological literacy with the Bene Gesserit affective literacy: the former provided a cognitive metaphor that apprehended the most productive opportunities for exercise of the latter. The next two sections explore how *Dune* represents its powerful literacies for "the creation and manipulation of affect" (*Empire*, 293), and what it means for Paul to strip ethics and ideals from his own performances of self.

1.4 Gendering the "Soft Power" of Affective Literacy

Understanding Paul's "heroic" effectiveness in *Dune* as a spectacle of affective labor mediated by literacies of complexity reveals a network of connections among labor, subjectivity, race, and gender only partially mapped in previous critical discussions of *Dune*.²⁵ Paul's extraordinary abilities both define and operate within a central site of cultural tension and contradiction within neoliberalism. On one hand, the way he strips the ethical and ideological content from every literacy he captures—as well as from his own interiority—vividly illustrates Brown's argument that within the normative rationality of neoliberalism, "subjects [are] liberated for the pursuit of their own enhancement of human capital, emancipated from all concerns with and regulation by the social, the political, the common, or the collective," leaving only "the norms and imperatives of the market" (108). Yet, at the same time subjects are pressured to

²⁵ Recent productive discussions of links between Paul's altered consciousness and the politics of colonialism by David Higgins and Gerald Gaylard don't engage with the gendered dynamics of affective production in the novel. Similarly, Miriam Youngerman Miller's excellent overview of femininity and power in the *Dune* series touches only briefly on Paul's appropriation of the BG's literacies.

minimize their “concerns with and regulation by the social,” the social connections that remain become sites for new, intensified forms of academic, scientific, and capitalist “innovation.” Under headings like “Affective Technology” and “Affective Management,” market-friendly researchers are working to map what is left of the social and harness it for profit, continuing the work of “extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life” that Brown argues is central to neoliberalism (*Undoing* 30).²⁶

Conspicuously missing from the dry, apolitical approach to “affective technology” in computer science and managerial studies is explicit recognition that the management of affects, feelings, and desires has characterized both the labor and the social experience of subordinated subjects: in the unpaid work of emotional regulation and myriad subaltern performances of subservience. As Deniz Kandiyoti argues in “Bargaining with Patriarchy,” women and people of color, relegated to positions of structural vulnerability, have developed sophisticated “interpersonal strategies that maximize their security through manipulation of their [social and economic superiors],” even though these “individual power tactics do little to alter the structurally unfavorable terms of the overall patriarchal script,” and indeed often serve to reinscribe and reinforce scripts of deference, silence, and segregation (84). Rearticulating these subaltern affective

²⁶ On the study of affect in computer science see Vinciarelli and Mohammadi 2010. For affect studies focused on executive performance and management see Umemuro 2009 and Authayarat and Umemuro 2012. While these authors describe their research in humanitarian terms—Umemuro argues that “it goes without saying” that developments in affective technology and management will lead to “a society that is gentle to people [and a] comfortable and peaceful place to live” (691). Such hopeful visions downplay affective technology’s many less benevolent applications in service to state and corporate power.

capacities—marked by their historical linkage to strategies of survival within and subservience to white male power—as the key components of Paul’s new “soft power” model of dominance is a central tension in *Dune*. Just as it did in late 20th century policy debates, the shift from “hard” to “soft” power as the basis for effective action in *Dune* stirs up deep-seated masculine anxieties about authority, virility, authenticity, and patrimony. Paul’s performances of power remix the traditional masculine scripts of aristocratic sovereign power, infusing them with *both* the elite cognitive labor associated with executives and financial analysts on one hand, and with the affective and somatic components of feminized “immaterial labor” that have become increasingly central in postindustrial capitalism on the other (*Empire* 293-4). In the novel, these map onto the Atreides brand of “*bravura*” and “sincerity,” Mentat extrapolation and Fremen Ecology, and the Bene Gesserit Way respectively. Much of the power Paul gains in the course of the novel comes from the fact that his synthesis of these literacies allows for the application of “feminine” Bene Gesserit techniques of affective production to the patriarchal genres of military and political performance to which his aristocratic class identity and cismale embodiment grant him access—performances the Bene Gesserit can analyze and articulate but, because of their sex, cannot enact themselves.

The Atreides literacy of “*bravura*” (6, 15, 31, 41, 48, 59, 65, etc.) is clearly a form of affective management: it consciously stokes love and devotion in allies, while encompassing foes through its maxim “*It’s easier to be terrified by an enemy you*

admire” (334).²⁷ Yet Leto is also marked by confusion about when to apply his core literacy of political leadership: “*Command must always look confident [...] never show [any other affect]*” (82). He vacillates between addressing Paul as father, “A whole pattern of conversation [...] he might use [on] his men [...] froze before it could be vocalized [...] *This is my son*” (42); as commander, “*I must mask my feelings [to] inspire him*” (78); or as equal and confidant, “I’m morally tired [...] I have to have someone I can say these things to” (104-5). As Leto struggles among these positions, we learn not only about his relationship to his son, but about his ethical relationship to his own affective performances—an ethic that privileges authenticity as a central pillar of masculine identity. Leto still identifies his sense of interiority with his performances of bravura and *noblesse oblige*: He desires not merely to *appear*, but to *be* noble and brave, and so he is haunted by disconnections between his interiority and his public image.

It is precisely this investment in a consistent sense of self—and the consequent moral dread and exhaustion—that distinguishes Leto’s affective literacy from that of the Bene Gesserit. James Paul Gee argues that while most affective literacies lack meta-concepts for self-examination (Gee 530), some are “powerful” because they recognize that “there is no real sense in which we humans are consistent or well-integrated creatures from a cognitive or social standpoint” (Gee 527).²⁸ Instead, Gee argues we continually

²⁷ Amongst critics examining *Dune* through the lens of political rhetoric, Mulcahy in particular is attentive to the way the text undercuts the early moral binary of Atreides and Harkonnen styles of governance in order to offer a critique of idealistic political naiveté and thoroughgoing pragmatic realpolitik alike.

²⁸ Although Gee refers to these literacies as “liberating (powerful),” I simply use powerful here. Gee is optimistic about the liberatory potential of critical literacies because he envisions their use by subaltern and

struggle to construct and maintain our identities through participation in social networks. “Powerful” literacies incorporate this insight, allowing their initiates to apprehend “the way [competing literacies] constitute us as persons and situate us in society” (Gee 531). The “Bene Gesserit way” (*Dune* 73) is just such a “powerful” self-aware affective literacy, allowing its initiates to produce performances of interiority as a matter of strategic choice, rather than reflex.

A key advantage of this powerful Bene Gesserit literacy is the ability to diagnose the “consistent and well-integrated creatures” characters like Leto are striving to be. This gives Paul and Jessica a more sophisticated understanding of such characters’ place within the complex ecology of their society’s affective megatext than those characters have of themselves. Nowhere is this awareness differential as clear as in the confrontation between Jessica and Thufir (150-157): She tries, unsuccessfully, to persuade him to “apply [his] Mentat abilities to.... the basic arrangements of [their] lives” in order to think an attack, not on a person’s body, but on their “place” within a social network. “To break up this natural order [is] to disturb, disrupt, and confuse us,” she argues. “Destroy the place and destroy the person.” Jessica’s apprehension of the social ecology they inhabit equips her to grasp a field of attack and defense to which Thufir—for all his Mentat logic—has no access. As in the case of the ecological literacies discussed above, understanding of a subject’s place in a networked system (in this case, culture) ultimately

subordinated subjects. As *Dune* shows, “powerful” literacies are just as effective in the service of privilege and domination.

affords Jessica and Paul opportunities to gain, through their power management of affect, a deeper compulsive effect than they could achieve by direct coercion.

The novel carefully builds up readers' understanding of the Bene Gesserit's powerful literacy by slowly expanding the scope of Jessica's—and later Paul's—usage of it to perceive and influence others. First they are shown “exposing” (6), “goaded” (22), “reading” (50), and “using trickery to persuade” (50) single characters. Then readers are tutored through the more complex but still interpersonal dynamics of a banquet (126-46). When Paul and Jessica use those powers on a mass of thousands during his pivotal speech assuming control of the Fremens (426-30), this narrative work connecting the techniques of interpersonal to mass-manipulation allows the reader to fill in the detail of exactly how Bene Gesserit techniques allow Paul to “probe the emotional undercurrents” of the Fremens and calibrate the “subtle intonations” of his performance for maximum persuasive effect (426). Strict attention to this speech as a political event, a plot event, misses these connections to intimate exchange—connections that cue the reader to articulate the scene as an act of affective power management. Strict attention to politics and plot also obscures the key distinction that, although both Paul and Jessica employ the Bene Gesserit way to read the crowd, only Paul can use that discourse's insights to optimize his performance of this emphatically masculine autocratic pose.

Combining the capacity to rapidly ascertain the optimum affective performance needed to profit in a situation with the ability to rapidly adjust one's own affective output to meet that need, this “powerful” Bene Gesserit literacy provides a potent metaphor for thinking how postindustrial logics of flexible “Toyotist” batch production (Hardt and

Negri 289-90) or “just in time production” (Martin 76-78) interact with gendered codes of affective performance. The Bene Gesserit use this powerful awareness to batch produce social performances minutely tailored to a specific individual or group. Such calculated social production, like a *feint*, involves enacting the precise combination of actions, words, tone, and demeanor to trigger a desired effect—precisely what we see in the Bene Gesserit powers of “registering” and “the Voice.” The more minutely one can read the desires of others, and tune one’s affect in response, the more social performance falls within the instrumental logic of power management.

The *capacity* to engage in the power management of social and political interaction through such techniques does not necessarily entail a *willingness* to do so. While she is not constrained by the existential angst that circumscribes Leto’s performances of self, Jessica often refrains from utilizing the full powers of her literacy—particularly when interacting with intimates and possible allies. Sometimes she holds back her perceptive powers because they would “shame [the other], frighten him to learn he’s so easily read” (65). Sometimes her reasons are less benevolent, factoring in the value of an “unblunted” ally “with full freedom of action” (280). Yet most important is Jessica’s belief that using the Bene Gesserit literacy for “motivating people [...] forcing them to your will, gives you a cynical attitude toward humanity. It degrades everything it touches”—the manipulator most of all (65). In the interest of her own ethical and emotional wellbeing, she relinquishes opportunities for situational power, safeguarding both her own narrative of self, and the integrity of the affective networks she inhabits.

Jessica's awareness of the moral and social hazards involved in the batch production of affect is a reminder not only of the subjective cost of instrumentalizing affect, but of the historical connection between skill at monitoring one's affective performance and positions of degrading subordination in our own world. The Bene Gesserit's favored mottos—"I exist only to serve" (23) and "that which submits, rules" (26)—can be read as a sardonic recognition of the subordination of women and other minorities, and the legacy of their "labor in the bodily mode" within patriarchy. In "Women of *Dune*" Miriam Youngerman Miller argues persuasively that as powerful as the Bene Gesserit are in *Dune*, they are never fully able or willing to escape the restrictions of their feminine roles as mothers and wives. This is the dynamic we see in Jessica, whose performances as "a weirding woman" are always in tension with those of wife and mother. She will not use her skills to compel Leto (*Dune* 50, 64-5), or to destroy his enemies (156), because both would "make a weakling of [him], make him dependent on [her]" (156). Yet the fact remains that she *could*, and so her threat to masculine authority and autonomy persists.

However, the critical, proto-feminist charge of this standpoint is mostly dissipated when the Bene Gesserit's literacy is figured agonistically as an "arsenal [...] the fist within the Bene Gesserit glove" (*Dune* 156). While the Bene Gesserit may demonstrate a historically charged "feminine wisdom" by figuring their power of compulsion as a "two-edged sword" to be wielded with utmost care (156), this phallic image also casts the Sisterhood's affective capacities as a form of threatening "female masculinity," dangerous to traditional masculine identity and authority—a threat only partially

recuperated by Paul's problematic appropriation of that power for male use toward more conventional patriarchal goals of domination.²⁹

1.5 Paul's Consciousness and the tragic Heroism of Neoliberalism

If the Bene Gesserit's "two-bladed sword" is so hazardous, what are we to make not only of Paul's appropriation of this powerful feminine-coded literacy, but of his recklessly promiscuous deployment of it? In Paul's manic cultivation of affective literacy as a weapon of first rather than last resort, we see their practices of meditation and self-awareness blur into a discipline of self-abnegation: Paul wields the sword against himself. The particular form of hollowed-out interiority Paul carves for himself is what scholars now call neoliberal flexibility. As many have argued, this flexibility goes beyond a readiness to adapt to rapidly changing job markets. It is a form of diminished ethical and political subjectivity, resulting from the struggle to navigate contradictory neoliberal pressures to minimize social and affective bonds, and the emphasis postindustrial capitalism places on exploiting what remains of those bonds.

In the logic of neoliberalism, human relationships become forms of investment, and affective literacies enjoin us to maximize our return on those investments. This is exactly what we see in Paul's relationships throughout the novel. Unlike Leto and Jessica, Paul's performance is bound only by expediency. He hems and haws, flinches and mourns, but ultimately he always exercises the instrumental option which maximizes

²⁹ Jack Halberstam develops this concept in *Female Masculinity*. Especially relevant to the Bene Gesserit and their relation to Paul is Halberstam's reading of the tense relation between Bond and Judi Dench's M in *Goldeneye* (3-4).

his “return” in the form of power and control, no matter the cost to himself or others.

While *Dune* portrays the results as tragic, they nevertheless follow the neoliberal maxim that “human capitals, like all other capitals, are constrained by markets [...] to comport themselves in ways that outperform the competition” (*Undoing* 109).

Paul’s own pronouncements on the performance of power echo power management’s focus on internalizing the flexible mobility and adaptability of neoliberal subjectivity:

The person [performing] greatness [...] *must reflect what is projected upon him*. And he must have a strong sense of the sardonic. This is what *uncouples him from belief* in his own pretensions. The sardonic is all that permits him to *move within himself*. (*Dune* 126, my emphasis)

Uncoupled from a consistent self, untethered from ethical considerations, Paul is free not only to perform, but to *be* whoever is required by the exigencies of the situation. In the climax of the novel, Paul Atreides, Usul, Kwisatz Haderach, and Muad’Dib all speak separately from one mouth (471-89), each a distinct performance responding to a different assemblage of personal, political, and material elements within the scene. We must resist reading this as separate but individually authentic “multiple personalities.” Rather, all of Paul’s affective bonds (familial, homosocial, political, romantic) are attenuated, fragmented across a suite of sardonically performative masks, “uncoupled from belief” and hence from commitment. Paul rearticulates his sense of identity as “a

theatre of processes” (380), a repository of useful techniques that can be deployed as timely responses to perceived opportunity.³⁰

Here our conversation returns to Paul’s appropriation of the Mentats’ computational discipline. Combining the sardonic affective flexibility of the Bene Gesserit with the Mentat’s capacity for speculative extrapolation, Paul uncouples himself not just from self and history, but from space and time. He can “move within himself”; as Kwisatz Haderach Paul can project his awareness into the roiling timescape, seeing “many places at once” (13). Randy Martin describes the entrepreneurial subject of neoliberalism as having a self “dispossessed of a secure past, present, and future” (*Indifference*, 36), like Paul. Unmoored from history and continuity, Paul achieves an unprecedented mobility and flexibility, allowing him to “prey [] on marginal fluctuations [and] balance with alacrity” where the obsolete, encumbered stable subject would stand fast (*Indifference*, 36). “Poised within his awareness,” Paul spreads his consciousness “like a net gathering countless worlds and forces” (*Dune* 362), identifying threats and opportunities in possible futures.

This figure of the hollow-but-mobile, everywhere-and-nowhere Kwisatz Haderach resonates with the structural demands of a globalized and networked capitalism. There is a clear linkage between a panoptic, non-local subjectivity such as Paul’s and Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr.’s description of the vision of decentralized, global networks of capital and power in Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*. Like Paul, *Empire* “exhausts

³⁰ Amanda Rudd develops a compelling Deluzian reading of the political effects of Paul’s fragmentation in “Paul’s Empire: Imperialism and Assemblage Theory in Frank Herbert’s *Dune*.”

and suspends historical time [...] its physical space is limitless, open to perpetual expansion, and its social space is open to variety, hybridity, and relentless denaturing [...] Empire intervenes both in the social world and in the minds of individuals, two spheres [its practices] fuse” (“Science Fiction and Empire” 237). Paul’s cyborg consciousness anticipates both the expansive temporality of Empire and its imbrication of the economic, political, and personal. This imperial perspective allows Paul to tune his instrumental performances of interiority, not merely to his observations of his immediate surroundings and his immediate interlocutors, but to the whole social system in both its present and its many possible future states.

Paul’s combination of surveillance of the time-streams with expanded knowledge of the present, and his capacity to calibrate his affect in response to both, also anticipates the fantasy of power implicit within the temporal logics of financial speculation and military pre-emption have shaped institutional and state action within neoliberalism (Martin, *Indifference* 19, 34, 36). As Martin argues, “an imperial unconscious percolates up from a desire for domination and an urge to see the whole complexity of the world” (*Indifference* 1). Paul’s actions throughout the novel are attempts to preemptively manage the present in order to contain those futures. He disciplines his altered consciousness to maximize this preemptive capacity, to expand the scale of effects he can achieve by leveraging his grasp of the future into power in the present.³¹

³¹ For the relation between temporality, speculative vision, and posthuman subjectivity in financial services discourse see Pearson 2016.

Yet this spectacle of masterful domination *Dune* presents is complicated by the fact that as the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult to discern Paul's intentionality within his own actions. As his power over others grows, Paul finds that navigating his psychoprosthesis *techne* becomes an increasingly precarious "tightrope he must walk" (362). In order to activate the flexible, responsive techniques of his weaponized ecological and affective literacies, and bring them to bear on the information his Mentat speculations produce, Paul must surrender his self-direction and become increasingly reactive. Randy Martin points to this tension at the heart of power management when he argues that, in seeking their own self-interest, "the arbitrage is embedded in the decisions of others, surfing the waves of decision and deriving unseen value from the undertow" (*Indifference*, 22). Here yawns what Leonard Scigaj called "the trap of prescience" ("*Prana*" 343) in *Dune*: when sensitivity to opportunity shades into reflexive response, individuality and masculine autonomy are lost—abandoned—to an automated, deterministic rehearsal that the reaction-to-stimuli technique demands. Dominating other *individuals* means surrendering to the demands of larger *structural* and *systemic* forces. Paul's victory over the Harkonnens and the Emperor thus comes at the cost of capitulation to his true antagonist in the novel—jihad—his "terrible purpose" of creative genetic destruction and galactic war.

Juan Prieto-Pablas argues that figures such as Paul offer "a kind of hero in whom the reader's fears are projected more intensely than their desires" (*Ambivalent Hero*, 73). The wish-fulfilling spectacle of domination afforded by Paul's fusion of the Mentat, Fremen, and Bene Gesserit literacies of complexity is balanced against the destabilizing

crisis of identity resulting from his cultivation of the hollowed-out, flexible interiority required to contain and activate them. As Brown notes, for that the entrepreneurial subject of neoliberalism: “no longer is there a question of what one wants from life or how one might wish to craft the self [...] Human capitals [...] are constrained by markets [and must] align themselves to [...] where those markets may be going” (*Undoing* 109). In *Dune*, then, the stresses neoliberalism places on the subject, refigured as self-managed human capital, reach their logical conclusion: in pursuit of domination over others through superior adaptation to systemic opportunities, Paul ultimately surrenders control over himself, his own powers, and the forces they unleash.

1.6 Conclusion

Dune's obsessive attention to the instrumentality of human development—which reaches its dehumanizing culmination in Paul—is more relevant than ever today, when the development of “human capital” is one of the few goals corporate interests, the state, and the public seem to agree on. At every turn, we are exhorted to become entrepreneurs of the self, speculating on our own cognitive and social resources. The novel vividly illustrates that this entrepreneurial approach to power—like so much of the postindustrial service economy—relies as much on capitalism's appropriation and instrumentalization of powerful literacies and immaterial laboring practices developed by women and marginalized people as it does on innovations in communication technology and cybernetics. As such, *Dune* offers metaphors and models that can help us navigate the fraught gender dynamics of power and agency in our present socioeconomic moment of “leaning in” and “flex time,” high-frequency trading and big data, in which business

effectiveness can be measured on an “Affective Management Scorecard” (Authayarat and Umemuro 10-11).

An extraordinary passage late in the novel crystallizes *Dune*’s ability to speak to the pressures subjectivity must negotiate within late capitalism’s pivot towards financial capital and immaterial labor, and this pivot’s disorientating results:

there was about [Paul] a feeling of abandonment. He wondered if his ruh-spirit had slipped over somehow into the world where the Fremen thought he had his real existence—into the *alam al-mithal*, the world of similitudes, that metaphysical realm where all physical limitations are removed. And he knew a fear of such a place, because removal of all limitations meant removal of all points of reference. In the landscape of a myth, he could not orient himself and say “I am I because I am here.” (*Dune* 382).

Paul’s disoriented, abandoned interiority here echoes Lukács’s discussion of the struggle to think one’s “real existence” within commodity fetishism’s “world of similitudes.” In “Reification and the Class Consciousness of the Proletariat,” Lukács argues that “as the capitalist system [...] produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply [into] consciousness” (93). It is specifically within finance capitalism’s “landscape of myth”—where “all points of reference” to materiality have been effaced—that “the problems of consciousness arising from [the alienation of] wage labor are repeated in the ruling class in a refined and spiritualized” form (“Reification” 93). In Lukács’s terms, Paul’s interiorization of the Mentat and Bene Gesserit disciplines engenders a clear-eyed but ultimately passive “contemplative attitude *vis-à-vis* the working of his own objectified and reified faculties [his] subjectivity itself, knowledge, temperament, and powers of expression are reduced to an abstract mechanism functioning autonomously and divorced both from the

personality of their ‘owner’ and from the material and concrete nature” of the situations in which they are deployed (“Reification” 100).

This fragmentation and dislocation of Paul’s interiority speaks both to changes in the structure of corporate culture in late capitalism, and to the experience of workers grappling with those changes. Uses language similar to the passage above, Richard Sennett criticizes flexible capitalism as an “illegible regime of power” in which workers can no longer orient themselves ethically or temporally (*Corrosion of Character* 10). Much of this disorientation results from corporate restructuring trends in the 1980s and 90s, when firms like Nike used outsourcing and just-in-time production to become “hollow” corporations, lean and flexible enough to calibrate their branded product lines to any shift in market conditions (Sennett 56). Enacting a parallel hollowing structure, Paul re-organizes his consciousness to free himself from cumbersome “fixed” investments—in relationships, in stable performances of self. And like the corporate workers Sennett discusses, Paul finds his sense of identity and ethics “corroded” by the demands of these new strategies of flexibility and abandonment.

Paul’s “hollow” subjectivity finds echoes in another discussion of the corrosive effects of American work culture: postwar anxieties about the status of individual masculine autonomy crystalized by David Riesman his 1950 bestseller *The Lonely Crowd*. For Riesman, the properly inner-directed man displays masculine self-possession by defining his own goals and norms, while the outer-directed give up their autonomy

and try to please others.³² But in a neoliberal market-world—marked by the “removal of all points of reference”—the desires of others are all that remains. Paul must become outer-directed to navigate this sea of dislocated desires. Paul gives himself up to his own reification in pursuit of power-over. He abandons himself, not simply to fulfill the desires of others, but to facilitate his literacies’ complex strategies for controlling others *through* their desires. Paul gives himself up to his own reification in pursuit of power-over.³³

Paul’s affective literacies prey on the other-direction of others. In doing so, he blazes a now-familiar trail which links the postwar discourse epitomized by Riesman to the cultural politics of today. In *Why We Love Sociopaths* Adam Kotsko explores the widespread suspicion in late capitalism that “a person’s natural sympathies and inclinations can truly be their greatest weakness” (14). The corollary of this suspicion that our inability to be heartless is holding us back, Kotsko argues, is the fantasy of sociopathy: “if I “truly didn’t give a fuck about anyone [...] I would be powerful and free” (4). Paul’s development in *Dune* plays the fantasy of sociopathy out to its sad ends.

³² While the American preoccupation with threats to masculine independence runs back at least through Thoreau and Emerson, after WWII texts such as Wilson’s *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* and Whyte’s *The Organization Man* joined Riesman in focusing the discussion on corporate office culture’s threats to white masculinity. See Timothy Melley’s discussion of postwar masculine crisis in *Empire of Conspiracy* 47-63.

³³ We can read also *Dune* as an early and influential exploration of how issues of masculinity, sociality, economics, and political power are transformed by the emergence of what Donna Haraway called “the informatics of domination” (“Cyborg” 163). *Dune* is obsessed with the idea of a networked reality, and it represents Paul as kind of a hacker of social and political codes. Although much of Paul’s ability to “code” comes from the proto-feminist Bene Gesserit, his story displays capitalism’s ability to cannibalize discourse for its own uses. Despite the control he achieves over others, Paul cannot perform the liberatory self-hacking Haraway argues is necessary for the cyborg to reconstruct herself as an agent of freedom and self-determination. Despite his competitive advantage over other agents, Paul realizes he is ultimately only an instrument of the larger network of forces, fulfilling his “terrible purpose” of creative genetic destruction.

Paul's powerful literacies hollow out every relationship, transforming them into "receptacle[s] for awe and obedience" (*Dune* 469). The power and freedom he achieves through this sociopathic strategy has the dual sense Marx emphasized—the radical freedom of destitution, this time affective rather than material.

The pervasiveness of such sociopathic fantasies throughout contemporary popular culture registers the normalization of the neoliberal subjectivity Wendy Brown calls *homo economicus*, which "may no longer have a heart at all" (*Undoing* 84). The freedom he achieves through this terrible power has the dual sense Marx emphasized—the radical freedom of destitution (this time affective rather than material) achieved through a deliberate program of self-abnegation. Standing historically at the pivot from postwar to postmodernity, *Dune* bridges a key shift in the characterization of masculine heroism. *Dune* clearly stands within the genealogy of colonial adventure heroes stretching back into the Victorian era. Yet, *Dune* also offered an early articulation of one of the key financializing logics that would come to define late-capitalism. The novel's crossover into popular circulation served to mainstream power management as a new problematic for the construction of postindustrial subjectivity and agency, splitting off a new trajectory of texts that explore its pathological result—not a postmodern schizophrenia and anesthesia, but a distinctive self-conscious sociopathy. The sociopathic antiheroes in texts such as the John Brunner's *The Shockwave Rider* (1975), Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen* (1986), Grant Morrison and Mark Waid's runs on the *Justice League of America* (1996-2001), Jeff Linsey's *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (2004) and the Showtime television series it inspired (2006-2013), R. Scott Bakker's *The Prince of*

Nothing trilogy (2003-6), and Brian Staveley's *The Emperor's Blades* (2013) all grapple with the complex relationship between powerful affective literacy, reified consciousness, and "abandoned" masculine interiority first sketched out in *Dune*. A critical reappraisal of Herbert's novel helps us identify and critique the racialized and gendered dynamics of appropriation that defined Paul's exceptional consciousness—and thus helps us recognize those dynamics within the insistently white and male sociopathic figures of today.

While *Dune* provides a cognitive map of finance capital's subsumption of the individual subject, in the next two chapters I will examine how, over the course of two decades, neoliberal governance and finance ontology subsumed our imagination of collective social and political agency, using the popular fantasies of the DC Comics continuity. In the evolving relationship between Batman and the Justice League of America, democratic ideals are slowly subordinated to the instrumental logic of speculative capital.

Chapter Two
**Managing Superpowers: Popular Fantasies for a Neoliberal Present Pt. 1:
Batman and the Justice League in the Wake of Reagan 1983-1996**

While Paul Atreides is the first fully developed power manager, and *Dune* exerts an enduring influence as the founding text of the power management trajectory, the most recognizable and popular power manager in American popular culture today is Batman. Even those unfamiliar with the sf, fantasy, and superhero genres have some familiarity with the Dark Knight, and it is easy to identify the elements of power management that animate the character's *modus operandi*: All the spectacular physicality of Batman's heroism is grounded in and directed by even more exceptional performances of cognitive labor, in the work of induction, speculative prediction, and strategic planning. Batman uses his extraordinary mind to identify which of his skills and gadgets meet the dynamic needs of the situation, and deploy them precisely so as to leverage each mundane element to achieve superheroic effects. Yet while these are widely and easily recognized elements of Batman today, they were not always dominant aspects of the character. As Andrew Hobereck argues, this understanding of Batman as a "master strategist [was] nascent in the character's pre-1986 appearances, but has since become dominant" (*Considering* 59). This emergence into dominance is a cumulative result of key changes in both the character and the larger DC universe during the 1980s and 1990s.

In chapters two and three, I argue that Batman served as a fulcrum with which DC Comics levered its shared universe out of the imaginary of postwar industrial capitalism and into the fraught new headspace of financialized neoliberalism. Not only has the characterization of Batman himself shifted in ways that brought his latent power

management abilities to the fore, but Batman-figures—either the Dark Knight himself, or recognizable doubles, or shadows of the character—have been key pivots around which the DC Universe turned between 1985 and 2000. During this period, often called the “Dark Age” by comic scholars, successive waves of revisionary texts struggled to rearticulate the superhero genre both to make sense *within*, and to make sense *of*, the social reality being imposed by newly dominant neoliberalism.¹

As LiPuma and Lee argue, the distributed structure and abstract processes of the financial markets make it difficult for citizens to trace connections between the actions of the finance industry and those actions’ concrete effects on the lives of normal people and the workings of democratic society. Ramzi Fawaz argues that the form of the superhero comic is ideal for helping the public negotiate just such spectral or abstract social powers. The reinvention of the DC universe in the wake of 1985’s *Crisis on Infinite Earths*,² and the evolution of the Justice League of America in particular, can be understood as a kind of socioeconomic parable for grasping how the political mythology of egalitarian

¹ Comics scholars and fans divide the history of mainstream American comics into of the following “ages”: The Golden Age of nationalist heroism 1938-1956; the Silver Age of technofantasy 1956-1971; the Bronze Age of “socially relevant” heroes with problems 1970-1985; and the Dark Age of violent anti-heroism 1986-1996. Consensus has yet to emerge what to call the most recent “age” 1996-.

² By the 1980s, the DC universe had accumulated a multitude of alternative universes, each representing a different version of the larger narrative continuity. For a time, this multiverse functioned to reconcile decades of accumulated slippage as character histories were retold and retooled in new books, and it helped explain how characters like Batman, who debuted in the 1930s, could still be in the prime of life decades later. By 1985, this multiverse had become a narrative snarl, and DC’s editors felt its complexity was a barrier to new readers. The *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was a diegetic apocalypse, an in-continuity event in which all those universes were destroyed. Only one remained, the sole narrative reality going forward. The result was a blank slate, in which everything could be established again “for the first time,” setting up new origins, new motivations, and new interrelationships for DC’s characters. This total retro-conversion of DC’s universe took place in the depths of the Reagan revolution, and the reality that emerges is a capitalist reality, governed by a capitalist realism.

democracy was corroded, mutated, and ultimately overtaken by the neoliberal logic of financial capitalism.

As Richard Sennett and Mark Fisher have noted, the creative destruction inherent in both financial capitalism and neoliberal governance leads to a vertiginous experience of precarity, fragmentation, and disorientation. Normal politics, normal economic interactions, “normal” life is suffused by frustration and paralysis, what Fisher calls “reflexive impotence.” Superhero comics offer a way to “think” this condition of impotence by idealizing positions outside of it. As fantasies of power, superhero comics must both imagine bodies and subjectivities that are *still capable of making change*, and articulate why power resides in an exceptional space of heroism rather than in the course of “normal” socioeconomic life. This makes superhero comics invaluable for cognitively mapping our diminishing sense of agency within neoliberalism’s state of perpetual exception. As a popular fantasy of agency, “the superhero” offers a fraught mixture of critical and recuperative perspectives. In imaginatively engaging with the new forms of neoliberal power, these narratives investigate how “neoliberal heroes” are distinct from older fantasy figures and interrogate whether power should take these new forms. Yet these texts simultaneously allow readers to test their desire to inhabit those forms of privilege and power. Juan Prieto-Pablas argues that figures like Paul and Batman represent “a kind of hero in whom the reader’s fears are projected more intensely than their desires” (*Ambivalent Hero*, 73). As with Paul Atreides in *Dune*, Batman’s fantastical heroism marks a new form of heroic agency aligned with the emerging

systems of financial power, presented as a spectacle that is equal parts awesome and terrifying.

Batman's development into an explicit power manager offers a case-study in how a popular fantasy of power "thinks" neoliberal culture. Batman—as well as his many shadows and stand-ins—slowly became aligned with undemocratic forms of financialized power whose influence became increasingly visible during the Reagan/Thatcher revolution, and flourished under the Third Way politics of Clinton and Blair. Batman became a lightning rod for larger cultural tensions between competing visions of super-powered social, political, and military agency: on one side, the ideals of democratic humanism Ramzi Fawaz calls "comic book cosmopolitics," and on the other the governing logic of neoliberalism diagnosed by Wendy Brown, Mark Fisher, and others.

As was the case in *Dune*, DC's re-articulation of Batman's heroic performance negotiates shifts in the ways immaterial laboring practices generate value, profit, and prestige in postwar society. In comics' Silver Age, superheroism was defined through struggles over the knowledge being created by blue-sky basic research in the physical sciences, which propelled both industrial capitalism and industrial warfare in the post war era—both the cold war and the green revolution. Such knowledge was worth fighting over because it facilitates fixed investments in more advanced productive infrastructure, which in turn produces more powerful and effective machinery—whether that machinery is intended to feed the world or destroy it. Superhero comics offer a fantasy of power that cognitively maps this relation of knowledge and production through the discourse of mad

scientists and heroic gizmoteers, deathrays and power armor suits.³ Silver Age “science heroism” represents the struggle to define moral boundaries for a rapidly technologizing Space Age society.

However, with the shift towards postindustrial, financial capitalism as the driving force of Western economies from the late 1970s onwards, the power dynamics of knowledge production change dramatically. While knowledge that ultimately enhances production continues to be an important aspect of the economy, knowledge practices associated with speculation became increasingly prominent. Precision, timing and context, not expanded production capacity, are the factors that magnify one’s capital and generate desired effects in the world of finance—the finance ontology described by Brown, Fisher, and Martin. As this finance ontology sinks deeper into American popular consciousness, power management usurps science heroism as the dominant sense-making fantasy of power.

The revisions to the DC universe in the 1980s “think” the implications of this finance ontology by putting characters defined by their speculative practices at the center of the texts that lay the foundation of a new canon of superheroism after *Crisis on Infinite Earths* reset their continuity in 1985. Some of the most important examples of this are the reinvention of Lex Luthor in *The Man of Steel* (Byrne 1986), the pivotal role Adrian Veidt plays in the plot of *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons 1986), and Amanda Waller’s instrumental management of the *Suicide Squad* (Ostrander 1987). These

³ While this relation of knowledge and power is obvious in Silver Age inventor-heroes like DC’s The Atom or Marvel’s Iron Man, it extends easily to heroes like Superman, whose powers are not derived from science, but are metonymically linked to the imaginary of industrial progress established through comparison to then-cutting edge tech such as planes and locomotives.

characters achieve their goals, not through their superhuman production of superior force, but by precisely timing their “merely human” interventions to maximize their impact, and by manipulating the information environment to limit or even predetermine the opportunities for intervention available to their others—strategies that follow the same trajectory of power management I identified in *Dune*.

At the beginning of the trajectory of comic narratives I trace here, the neoliberal toolset of power management is clearly divided between military and business practices, which are staged as distinct and opposing forces and incarnated by separate figures. This is likely because the dramatic and destabilizing effects of Reaganite “cowboy diplomacy” were so easily apparent—and so a ripe target for mapping through satire and popular fantasy—compared to the slower violence of neoliberal domestic and economic policy. Yet this division between military and economic fronts of the neoliberal revolution is ultimately illusory. As Martin argues, “While not reducible to the interests of finance capital, war today takes on a financial logic in the way it is organized and prosecuted” (*Indifference 2*). In each successive text, these distinctions blur, until they merge into a single performance of exemplary power management in Grant Morrison’s *JLA* (1997-2001). Even when they remain coded as representing the military or economic aspects of the emerging neoliberal order, the developing power managers in these texts excel by shaping themselves—developing their own human capital—so as to perform the immaterial labor of speculative vision and resource allocation, combined as risk management. In both the derivative trading of the financial markets and the forward deployments of special operations troops, “risk management installs a preemptive

temporality: imagine what might happen and take care of it straightway” (Martin “War” 19). Whether their idealized puissance is framed as military or economic, these characters excel by leveraging their capacity to see further and think faster

It is through struggling with these power managers, by striving to defeat or at least contain the speculative energies they represent, that DC re-articulates the meaning of superheroism in the neoliberal moment of the late 1980s. The question these speculative characters pose in their respective texts is the same one a triumphant Ozymandias poses to his stupefied peers: “My new world demands less obvious heroism, making your schoolboy heroics redundant. What have they achieved?” (*Watchmen* #12, 17). Win or lose, “traditional” modes of heroism are fundamentally transformed by their struggle against these speculative characters.⁴ Through the generic tropes of superheroism, then, texts like the *Man of Steel*, *Watchmen*, and *Suicide Squad* both perform the “finance ontology” of the 1980s, and critique its moral and ideological fallout.

2.1: Hard Body vs. Power Manager: Two Paths towards “Serious” Heroism

While many texts illustrate the formative struggle with finance ontology in the DC universe, in what follows I focus on how it plays out in Batman’s fraught relationship

⁴ Financial acumen threatens to subordinate the old industrial heroism to the new logics of capitalism in the same way that Hardt and Negri argue agriculture was subordinated to industry during industrialization: It doesn’t go away, but it is fundamentally transformed. “When agriculture came under the domination of industry, even when agriculture was still predominant in quantitative terms, it became subject to the social and financial pressures of industry [...] [agriculture] did not disappear, it remained an essential component of modern industrial economies, but it was now a transformed, industrial agriculture” (*Empire* 281). While tropes of pulp heroism remain, they—and the way we experience them—have been altered. They are either re-articulated within the new terms of informatized power, or, in unreconstructed form, they are consumed in the mode of camp or nostalgia—creating the crisis of Hard Body masculinity discussed below.

to the Justice League of America between 1983 and 2001. First, because the JLA's historical connection to the comicbook cosmopolitics Fawaz identifies brings the political stakes of finance ontology closer to the surface of the texts. Second, because tracking Batman's transition into a power manager illuminates important linkages between the representational crisis in comic book superheroism and other patterns of masculine-heroism-in-distress during the period, particularly the life-cycle of the popular fantasy of masculinity Susan Jeffords dubbed "Hard-Body" heroism. Throughout the Reagan era, "hard-body" heroes like Rocky, Rambo, and Dirty Harry occupied the position of hegemonic dominance in American popular film. These deranged outsiders anchored their cultural authority and their masculine identity in violent performances of ideological fixity and physical inviolability, both expressed through spectacles of reactionary violence. In *Hard Bodies* Susan Jeffords argues that by the early 1990s the Hard Body figure started to collapse under the weight of its own success. After a decade in which Hard Body ideal defined both its politics and its entertainment, America—like any addict—built up a tolerance to its drug of choice. As a result, Jeffords argues, the strategy of hypertrophying characters' "qualities of spectacle and violence [was] no longer sufficient" to secure either their masculine identity or social authority. Indeed, "these characters had made themselves so spectacular that they began to verge on comic representations of themselves" (*Hard Bodies* 176). Although hard bodied heroes remained pervasive across the media landscape in the H.W. Bush and Clinton years, the texts that featured them were increasingly self-conscious, ironic, or parodic. In films like *Total Recall* (Verhoeven 1990) and *Demolition Man* (Brambilla 1993), we see this

generic crisis at work: each film is structured by the nostalgic desire for a “serious” engagement with hard body masculinity, but in each film the protagonist’s ultraviolence neither contains nor escapes from the ever-encroaching aesthetics of camp.⁵

A similar struggle against camp has been central to Batman’s character since the *Batman* TV show went off the air in 1968. For the last fifty years, writers, artists, and fans have been working to extricate Batman from Adam West’s iconic performance.⁶ The “Dark Knight,” as we know him today, took shape as a programmatic rejection of the Day-Glo campiness of the West era. While Denny O’Neil and Neal Adams worked to darken the Dark Knight throughout the 1970s, the effort to restructure the character took on new significance in the 1980s. For a variety of reasons, the comics industry wanted to change the medium’s image as “kid’s stuff” and market itself explicitly to an older demographic.⁷ The resonances between Batman writers’ existing war on camp and the

⁵ Jeffords charts out the dominant response to the slow implosion of the Hard Body’s cultural legitimacy in early 1990s American film: the retooling of the “hard” man into the “new” men of the 1990s” (Jeffords 176). Writing about the same process in *White Guys*, Fred Pfeil calls this new figure the sensitive “wild guy hero” who reconnects to his feelings and reclaims his “softness” while retaining his proximity to violence.

⁶ While this rejection of camp is the dominant position within comics fandom, the *Batman* television show remains an enduring cultural landmark. As Glen Weldon notes in *The Caped Crusade*, even when the TV show’s aesthetic fell out of favor with those who move the industry, it was still a beloved part of comic and television history, with its own loyal fans. In the last ten years, the joyously campy Westian Batman has seen resurgence as a reaction against the cultural dominance of the Nolan films’ dour, bluntly heteromasculine vision of the character, especially amongst LGBTQ+ folks and fans of color.

⁷ In addition to its aging fandom, a complex web of factors pushed superhero comic publishers to project a “more mature” image, including: loosening regulation under the Comics Code, contractual wrangling between creators and publishers, and changes in the logistics of comic book distribution. Geoff Klock argues in *How to Read Superhero Comics, and Why* that these same factors also encouraged a new generation of creators to approach the medium as “serious” auteurs. *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* were widely recognized as artistically serious “statements” in part because their dark, violent deconstructions of the superhero genre drew on formulas of auteur direction established in genre-busting films such as *The Wild Bunch* (Peckinpah 1969) and *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola 1979). In these terms, intensified and aestheticized violence is part of Bloomian rubrics for identifying the “strongest work,” that tells the “vital stories in their genre” (Klock 16).

dynamics of Hard Body heroism in the culture at large made the Dark Knight an ideal vehicle for DC to show its commitment to “getting serious.”

Frank Miller’s influential *The Dark Knight Returns* carefully cultivated its aura of narrative “seriousness” by focusing on the deranged, violent, obsessive aspects of Batman’s heroic performance. Critical and popular reception of the book, in turn, responded primarily to this violence. Indeed, both positive and negative reviews of *The Dark Knight Returns* clearly interpret the book within the hypermasculine discourses of hard body heroism Jeffords described. *The Village Voice* dismissed Miller’s version of the character as “Rambo in a cape,” but many fans celebrated Miller’s revision of the character precisely *because* it captured the hard body hero’s combination of violent spectacle and ideological fixity. While the grotesquely exaggerated musculature of Miller’s Batman suggests the “hard” physicality of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, fans at the time tended to connect the Dark Knight with the “hard” ideology of Clint Eastwood’s Harry Callahan.⁸

More than the violence Batman inflicted upon his foes, it was the way Miller rooted that violence in the character’s interiority that worked to banish the ghosts of camp. In Miller’s foreword to 1988’s *Batman: Year One*, he boasts that “If your only memory of Batman is that of Adam West and Burt Ward exchanging camped-out quips while clobbering slumming guest stars... I hope this book comes as a surprise. For me, Batman was never funny.” The terse, increasingly psychotic narration in *The Dark Knight*

⁸ A good example of this is fan Alan Plessinger, who argues in the letter column of *Batman and the Outsiders* #31 that “in the best of all possible worlds, The Batman would be played in the forthcoming movie by Clint Eastwood. No one could better express the silent fury of the Darknight Detective.”

Returns evacuates any “childlike” sense of excitement, wonder, or adventure from Batman’s vigilantism, leaving only the “mature”—or at least insistently not-camp—masculine affects of rage, obsession, and militarized discipline. Alongside the cognitive labor of invention and detection, then, the affective labor of “seriousness” became an essential part of Batman’s heroic performance.

Almost immediately, though, the masculine hyper-violence *The Dark Knight Returns* pioneered in comics fell into the same forms of crisis that plagued its cinematic version: once again, hypertrophying characters’ “qualities of spectacle and violence [proved] no longer sufficient” to secure either their masculine identity or social authority, and they rapidly spiraled into self-parody. (Jeffords 176). The same violence that served as proof against charges of childishness and camp in the 1980s came to be seen as an indicator of immaturity and campiness by the 1990s. The decade between 1986 and 1996 is often called the “Dark Age” of comics precisely because its emphasis on legitimation through hyper-violence has aged so poorly.⁹

Despite the diminishing returns of hard body heroism as a guarantor of seriousness, the Gotham-centered “Bat Family” titles continued to double down on this strategy throughout the 1990s.¹⁰ Yet critical focus on the Batman character’s role in

⁹ Much of the discussion of the revisionary period between 1985 and 1997, by both scholars and fans, focuses on how the spectacle of physical and ideological violence in *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* set the tone for the decade, for better or for worse. Miller quote “All they got from [the book] was that [it] was naughtier and a bit more brutal... [it] was admittedly pretty violent but they’re making it all vicious and very small.” (Sharrett, 45). Alan Moore has lamented a similar reception for *Watchmen*: American readers latched onto Rorschach, despite Moore’s stated intention to portray the character’s violent, ideological inflexibility as morally repugnant.

¹⁰ Both the popularity and the limits of Batman as a Hard Body Hero are dramatized in the “Knightfall” story arc in the main Batman titles (1993-5), in which Batman struggles against not one but two dark reflections of this aspect of his character. Bane is a steroid-addicted criminal polymath, a dark reflection of

performing and normalizing hard body violence in these titles obscures the longer-term influence of other portrayals of the Dark Knight. In Batman's appearances in team books like *Batman and the Outsiders* and *Justice League*, we can read Batman's development into a power manager as presenting an alternative strategy for securing the "seriousness" of Batman's masculine dominance and heroic gravitas. By grounding Batman's pathos in the cold calculation of neoliberal military and financial strategy, Batman's characterization in these texts provided a timely alternative for fans and creators who wanted a Batman whose "seriousness" was anchored in something other than the hot mess of traumatic violence that animated the "hard body" heroism that Jeffords diagnoses and the "sensitive wild men" that followed. While Batman's "solo" titles continued to chase the diminishing returns of hard body heroism, team-up books increasingly shifted towards capitalist realism and power management as primary sources for Batman's "seriousness."

Power management's alignment with finance ontology means that, to the extent that Batman operates as a power manager, his heroic performance both legitimates and is

Batman's *Count of Monte Crisco*-style autodidactic heroism. Azrael is a mentally unstable vigilante Batman was attempting to rehabilitate and mentor. When Bane breaks Batman's back, Azrael takes on the role of the Dark Knight while Wayne recovers. However, Azrael's performance as Batman is significantly more brutal, often leading to the death of suspects. After his recovery, Wayne is forced to battle Azrael to reclaim the Batman identity, a struggle that defines the "acceptable" level of violence for a "true" performance for the character. The creators of the Knightfall arc have said they were responding to fan's desire to see Batman act more like murderous vigilantes such as Marvel's *Punisher* and *Deadpool*, and the lethal heroism popular in Image and Wildstorm comics of the time. While the "Knightfall" arc did successfully reestablish the canonical Batman as a hero who Does Not Kill, many fans did (and still do) love Azrael and the hard body dynamic he stands for. See Weldon 192-4. Despite the work *JLA* was doing to retool the character, many advertisements for other Batman titles and products in the pages of *JLA* still emphasized the violently unstable "hard body" version of Batman. An ad in *JLA* #4 promoting Kenner action figures from the "Knightfall" era straightforwardly invokes a "MASSIVE, CHISLED, RIPPED" vision of the Dark Knight.

legitimated by capitalist realism. If readers accept that the “real conditions” of life within neoliberalism are agonistic competition, ruthless exploitation, and the requirement that every subject engage in the speculative development of their own human capital, then any representation of Batman’s character that emphasizes these activities will gain an ideologically visceral sense of “realism,” “grittiness,” and “seriousness”—exactly what comics critics like Klock and Weldon argue both fans and creators desired from the character during this period. While Batman’s influence as an emerging power manager is felt in many team-up books of the period, I focus mostly on the *Justice League of America*, because in the 1960s this title laid the foundations for the socially progressive “comicbook cosmopolitics” that neoliberal power management disrupts and supplants in the 1980s. As Fawaz argues, *Justice League of America* offered readers a powerful framework to imagine radical democratic practices through its own egalitarian decision-making process, its global mission, and its commitment to producing and sharing peaceful forms of scientific knowledge.¹¹ From its opening pages, the series

transformed the superhero from an icon of American nationalism to a champion of internationalism and universal citizenship. Even as they operated under the banner of ‘America,’ the Justice League members articulated their ethical commitment to the world

¹¹ The global scope of the Justice League’s adventures challenged the politics of containment, making the series “a generative site for imagining democracy in its most radical form, as a universally expansive ethical responsibility” (Fawaz 7). The team also practiced its commitment to limiting the state’s weaponization of knowledge by actively withholding a portion of their own knowledge and power. In their civilian guises, many of the team members were employees of the US military-industrial complex. While they were willing to give a “human” portion of their abilities to the cause of the state, only a transcendent sense of global citizenship was sufficient to access their full superhuman potential (Fawaz 39-42, 55-7). These were, at the time, progressive positions staked out by left –wing scientists and intellectuals, against the official positions of state power which wanted to conflate the advance of scientific knowledge with the power of the US as the hegemonic world leader. It will come as no surprise that much of the emotional energy driving discussion of science in general derived from contemporary debates over the use of nuclear technology, as a proprietary weapons tech or an instrument of global development.

in universal terms, refusing to limit their heroic service to anyone based on national origin, geographical location, or ethnoracial identity. (Fawaz, 39)

The adventures of the Justice League took each member away from the personal dramas and antagonism of their respective urban home turf. The League has jurisdiction over crises of a global or cosmic scale. Their first foe, Starro the Conqueror, was one of the first comic villains to project a truly global threat. In their next adventure, alien refugees request their help to save another planet from tyranny. Fawaz argues that in these world and galaxy spanning adventures, the *Justice League of America* emphasized “the lack of definition of the superhero’s ethical purview,” and by doing so retooled the conservative Golden Age superhero as “a generative site for imagining democracy in its most radical form, as a universally expansive ethical responsibility rather than an institutional structure upholding national citizenship” (7).

In each incarnation of the League since, those radical commitments have receded. Throughout the revisionary period, each of these ideals falls into a crisis centered on either Batman, or on one of Batman’s doubles or disavowed shadows. Each ideal is ultimately subverted and replaced with its corresponding neoliberal value: democracy with governance, internationalist diplomacy with unilateral intervention, industrial scientism with the speculative practices of finance ontology. This displacement of comicbook cosmopolitics by neoliberal power management as the dominant logic of superheroic agency expresses, at the level of popular fantasy, cultural shifts within neoliberalism that undermined the viability of social democratic politics at the close of the 20th century—Fisher’s capitalist realism. Here we see the subsumption of the demos under neoliberalism, what Wendy Brown calls “the vanquishing of the subject that

governs itself through moral autonomy and governs others through popular sovereignty,” (*Undoing* 79), and Richard Sennett calls the cooption of the “dangerous pronoun ‘we’” that powers radical grassroots struggle by the shallow “teamwork ‘we’” of neoliberal governance (*Corrosion* 147).

This chapter traces that transformation, both in the character and in the league, through the 1980s into the mid-1990s, when neoliberalism was in ascendance but had not yet achieved total cultural dominance. The pre-*Crisis* series *Batman and the Outsiders* (1983-6), clearly aligns Batman with Reaganite unilateralism, but series writer Mike W. Barr uses Batman mostly as a foil to highlight the Justice Leagues’ cosmopolitical ideals, and to foster those ideals in a new, younger team. In contrast, the next time Batman plays the role of anti-democratic unilateralist, in J. M. DeMatteis and Keith Giffen’s post-*Crisis* reboot of the *Justice League* (1987), he is successful in enforcing this vision on a newly reconstituted team. Batman’s paramilitary vision of the team, though, is itself subordinated by his double Maxwell Lord. Like Bruce Wayne, Lord is a millionaire who is more than he seems. Lord uses the tools and strategies of speculative finance to dominate the team, only to be destroyed in turn when he loses control of his financial powers. While both Batman and his double Lord ultimately fail as leaders in *Justice League*, they succeeded in showing that neoliberal interventionism and speculative finance ontology are more effective than traditional forms of cosmopolitical heroism, even if they are ethically suspect and morally unsatisfying.

Mark Waid and Alex Ross’s *Kingdom Come* (1996) accentuates this split between ethics and effectiveness. In a pointed commentary on the legacy of *Dark Knight Returns*

and *Watchmen*, the world of *Kingdom Come* is overrun by the kind of hyperviolent anti-heroes that flourished in the early 1990s. Superman and Wonder Woman reform the Justice League and set out to subjugate this unruly new generation. Batman and Lex Luthor must team up to save the world from the Justice League's morally confused totalitarian agenda. Of course, Batman eventually betrays Luthor and works to save what remains of the League, but not before *Kingdom Come* explores how similar Luthor and Wayne's financialized approaches to super-agency are, and how easily their speculative techniques of finance anticipate and outmaneuver Superman and Wonder Woman's antiquated style of heroism.

This split between ethical leadership and effective practice culminates in Grant Morrison's soft reboot *JLA* (1996-2001), which is examined in depth in Chapter 3. While *Kingdom Come* led the *reader* to an understanding that the practices of power management provide the deep structure of superheroism in the neoliberal age, in *JLA* we witness the League members *themselves* coming to this realization and consciously incorporating Batman's approach to power into their own heroic performances. Throughout the series, the narrative follows the contours of finance ontology: the closer performances of power hew to the language and structure of financial capital, the more spectacularly they are shown to succeed. Anchored in Batman's power management, *JLA* maps American power after "the end of history," offering a new imagination of global superheroism steeped the heady millennial imperialism of the Clinton-Blair era. *JLA*'s Batman captures the era's distinct *mélange* of "smart" weapons, "soft" power, and financialized neoimperialism. Yet, in the "Tower of Babel" plot arc, published in the

spring of 2001, the League must deal with the consequences of a world where the weapons of power management have proliferated, as Middle- Eastern eco-terrorist Ras al Ghul turns Batman's stratagems back on the League.¹²

Batman's rise to dominance as a power manager across these texts cognitively maps the sociocultural development of the mode of power Hardt and Negri call Empire, from its origins during the Reagan/Thatcher regimes to the height of its world-making influence in the heady millennialism of the late 1990s. Batman served as an avatar for both pincers of neoliberalism's invasion of consciousness—incarnating its socioeconomic (finance ontology) and military/sociopolitical (exceptionalism, unilateralism, anti-democratic governance) aspects. Batman presents us with an idealized neoliberal subjectivity, a model for how we might manage ourselves as human capital so as to achieve competitive dominance within disaster capitalism's war of all (capital subjects) against all. Yet, like Paul Atreides, Batman also models the horrific moral bankruptcy of that project, the extent to which neoliberal conceptions of selfhood, agency, and power are incompatible, not just with traditional modes of masculine selfhood and heroism, but with the progressive democratic ideals embedded in the cosmopolitical traditions of the superhero narrative.

¹² Ras al Ghul was introduced by O'Neil in the 1970s, as part of the effort to return Batman to his "darker" more "serious" roots. Of all of Batman's regular antagonists, Ras al Ghul brings out the power manager in Batman the most, because Ras uses the toolset of power management himself. Batman scholars spend a lot (too much) time making psychoanalytic arguments in which Two-Face and the Joker reveal Batman's repressed or divided nature. Ras pulls Batman out of the simplicities of psychoanalysis and Gotham both, towards the messy global complexities that underlay the power management perspective.

2.2 Batman and the Justice League in Reagan's America 1983-1988

2.2.1 Professionalism vs. Solidarity in *Batman and the Outsiders* (1983-86)

Batman and the Outsiders is an early example of the way DC comics used Batman's fraught participation in the superteam format to stage a struggle with the implications neoliberal modes of power had for superheroism as a political, ethical, and social practice. In Batman's first major challenge to the JLA's cosmopolitics, he stands in for the political and military policy of the Reagan administration's first term. Yet, while *Batman and the Outsiders* offers a sustained criticism of these policies, it does so without the clear connections to finance ontology that would re-structure the DC continuity after the *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. While, as Randy Martin argues, neoliberal military policy and speculative finance share the same underlying logics, finance capital remains a structuring absence in this text.

Debuting in May 1983, the opening arc of *Batman and the Outsiders* begins with Batman asking the Justice League to help him rescue his friend Lucius Fox, who has been caught up in a bloody coup in the fictional nation of Markovia. Superman and Wonder Woman explain that the US State Department and the United Nations believe that League intervention would be more likely to escalate the situation than solve it, and so the League has voted to stand down. Rejecting this appeal to internationalism and moderation, Batman resigns from the League and declares his intention to act unilaterally. In the process, he forms a new team who *will* act according to his orders. The Outsiders are initially figured as a paramilitary force for a unilateral war on global as well as domestic forms of disorder.

The Markovia crisis that provokes Batman's resignation from the JLA and creation of the Outsiders is a straightforward invocation of the wave of American interventions during Reagan's first term, including Nicaragua, Lebanon, and Grenada. The kidnapping of Batman's friend (and employee) Lucius Fox in the context of a coup operates as shorthand for the Iran Hostage Crisis, which was key in establishing the superiority of Ronald Reagan's unilateral "cowboy diplomacy" over the "weakness and ineffectiveness" of Jimmy Carter's dovish policy.¹³

Indeed, Baron Bedlam locates his coup within long-standing Cold War anxieties about international diplomacy's failure to check the Soviet Union's aggressive actions in Eastern Europe and Afghanistan. Playing out the logic of this Cold War script, Batman's reasoning in *Batman and the Outsiders #1* seems to uncannily anticipate the key role that "rescuing" American medical students would play in the US government's justification for the Invasion of Grenada, which took place in October of 1983, a few months after *Batman and the Outsiders'* debut—another aggressive action the UN was unable to prevent.

Despite the resonances this framing narrative had with contemporary politics, the political work Batman does in the series as a whole varies from conflicted to inconsistent. While it is Batman's stated intention to structure the team on explicitly anti-cosmopolitical terms (he will manage it as a paramilitary strike team using a top-down, need-to-know command structure), both his leadership of the team and the relationships

¹³ Of course, there are many reasons to believe that, like Nixon before him, Reagan had engaged in treasonous back-channel negotiations with "the enemy" to ensure that Carter's efforts to resolve the crisis failed. Reagan and Khomeini both reaped enormous (if short-term) domestic political dividends from their mutual hard-line posturing.

between team members hew much closer to the fractious family dynamic of DC's *Teen Titans* and Marvel's *X-Men*—both of which were bestsellers at the time. Sometimes the team members' familial solidarity is productively opposed to Batman's neoliberal management, but in other story arcs Batman is pulled into the family dynamic to play the role of trusted father figure. Such tonal inconsistency persists until Batman quits the group in issue #32.

At the heart of *Batman and the Outsiders* is the assertion that Batman views his heroic mission through the framework of war. *Batman and the Outsiders* #1 is titled "Wars Ended... Wars Begun!" Yet *Batman and the Outsiders* develops Batman's militarized self-discipline in a different direction than that taken by Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and the texts it influenced. In *Batman and the Outsiders*, Batman's obsessive drive to self-mastery is not imbricated with affects of hyper-masculine rage. Instead, the militarization of his heroic project is presented as evidence of a hard-nosed and clear-eyed professionalism, a "serious" approach to super-heroism that is directly contrasted to both the Justice League's focus on deliberation and the Outsiders' emphasis on affective solidarity. As Batman's resignation from the Justice League in *Batman and the Outsiders* #1 shows, his break with the League to pursue the path of unilateral "cowboy diplomacy" is grounded not in rash impatience or prideful individualism, but in an all-encompassing professionalism. "Nothing is more important" to Batman than "his work," work defined not as the Silver Age cosmopolitical project of creating and defending knowledge that produces a better society, but rather as a project of imperial terrorism (*Batman and the Outsiders* #1, 4). He is not interested in social transformation,

but in deterrence: the cultivation of ever more sophisticated and efficient technologies of fear that can contain and control threats to social stability. From this point on, he will turn that tool of control on his allies more and more often.

While *Batman and the Outsiders* is structured around Batman's rejection of comicbook cosmopolitics' radical commitments to both egalitarian internationalism and affective solidarity, those ideals themselves are ultimately affirmed in the course of the narrative. First, while Batman forms the Outsiders in opposition to the imperatives of global responsibility and international consensus that constrained the Justice League from action in Markovia, the Outsiders themselves demonstrate how people of different nationalities can work together for a common cause. Even as he rejects the internationalist project, Batman gathers together a group of characters who are explicitly coded as "foreign" and helps them build a coherent immigrant identity in Gotham.¹⁴ Despite his refusal to act as an "example" of the cosmopolitical ideals of the Justice League, Batman still creates the conditions in which the Outsiders can develop that ethos for themselves.

Second, many of the Outsiders' antagonists represent the same neoliberal impulses that motivated Batman to create the team. Batman's "professional" approach to superteam management is ironically echoed by the mercenary Masters of Disaster, who fight explicitly for profit. Similarly, Batman's persistent framing of his own heroic mission, and the Outsiders', as a "war" is problematized by almost immediately. In issue

¹⁴ Geo-Force is Markovian, Katana is Japanese. The amnesiac young woman Halo is effectively stateless. While Black Lightning and Metamorpho are American citizens, BL's blackness and Metamorpho's unstable embodiment complicate their easy claim to an American national identity. On the troubled links between race, disability, and citizenship in superhero comics, see Fawaz 59-64, 69, 72-84.

#3 they must subdue “Agent Orange,” a Vietnam veteran-turned-terrorist seeking revenge against the American government. Even as the Outsiders thwart his plot, they are noticeably sympathetic to his grievances against an imperial war machine that exploited young men’s patriotism to wage an unjust war, and then abandoned those men to their trauma and loss once they were no longer useful—precisely the relationship Batman seems to initially cultivate with his new “soldiers” the Outsiders.

This contradiction is even more pronounced in *Batman and the Outsiders Annual* #1 (provocatively titled “It’s 1984: Do You Know Where Your Freedoms Are?”), which introduces the Outsiders’ satirical doubles, the Force of July, a super powered strike-team working for the US military apparatus. The Outsider’s confrontation with the Force of July makes the Outsiders’ parallels with Reaganite foreign policy explicit. If *Batman and the Outsiders* asks whether the neoliberal anti-democratic exceptionalism animating Reagan’s policies could translate into a legitimate heroic project, the “1984” arc seems to come down conclusively on the negative. While the Outsiders are able to develop both their own individual identities as heroes and a powerful affective solidarity as a team *in spite of* Batman’s neoliberal style of leadership, the young people who form the Force of July have been reduced to reified images of the American power they serve. Without the cosmopolitical ideals that guide the Justice League, the superteam drifts back into the toxic nationalism that defined the Golden Age, where state-affiliated heroes like Captain

America regularly took time off from punching Nazis to rough up insufficiently patriotic Americans.¹⁵

One of the most exaggerated examples of how the Force of July embodies the threat of a return to toxic state-sanctioned superheroism is Black Lightning's beating at the hand of the Silent Majority (*Batman and the Outsiders Annual* #1, 15). State power has brought this racist dog-whistle to life. Despite the heavy-handed satire here, the image of a black superhero being contained and subdued by a nationalistic white male whose power is the endless replication of more white bodies is striking. This moment of racist violence—a fantastic staging of the southern strategy—is cheered on by another Force of Justice member in the same teen idiolect used by the Outsiders, a reminder that the bonds of affective affiliation, which Fawaz identifies with a radical “queer mutanity,” can also be turned to the purposes of ethno-nationalism, in a perversion of the progressive world-making possibilities he attributes to the superhero narrative in *The New Mutants*.

In a pattern that will repeat itself over and over in the texts examined here, the neoliberal elements that structure the Outsiders' heroic performance are externalized in bad doubles, and the Outsiders themselves are (at least partially) absolved of their complicity by defeating their evil shadows.¹⁶ Yet their symbolic victory over the Force of July is only a precursor to the Outsider's real struggle—the struggle to define themselves and their heroic mission independently from Batman's neoliberal logic.

¹⁵ See Stevens's *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence* 44-45, 63-5.

¹⁶ The Force of July survives to fight another day. They return in *Suicide Squad*, where they play a similar role as bad doubles that bring themes of nationalist violence and neoliberal governance to the surface of the text.

Batman's rejection of democratic cooperation or affective solidarity inaugurates the series, but his authoritarian style of leadership causes increasing tension as the Outsiders develop a cosmopolitical ethos amongst themselves. Batman's rejection of egalitarianism and solidarity stems from his fundamental desire to *command* his colleagues, rather than collaborate with them. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that Batman's struggle to define the strategy of his team mates, which comes to the fore in *Batman and the Outsiders* and has defined his character in team books ever since, is an attempt to think, through popular fantasy, the changing value of cognitive labor in military strategy and foreign policy in the neoliberal period.

Batman's priorities in *Batman and the Outsiders* reflect the ways neoliberal power was reshaping military doctrine during the 1980s. As Ashley Dawson argues, "the starry-eyed, technophallic discourse" of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) reimagines both "low intensity" special operations missions and large scale conventional deployments as "a technowar of 'surgical strikes'" ("Combat", 171). Conceptualizing military actors as nodes embedded in decentralized networks, RMA discourse valorizes a privileged position of visionary command, which can gather and analyze the information created by these networks, synthesizing them into a transcendent total situational awareness. From this position of superior knowledge, the networked commander can coordinate the localized actions of his military assets so as to synergize their impact. As Martin argues, this fantasy of informational supremacy translates warfare into risk management:

the battlefield would be rendered transparent through surveillance of all relevant information, and risks would be managed through systems models that could predict

optimal gains for minimal input [...] the RMA sought to eliminate human error or the fog of war by applying computer-assisted information processing to automated weapons delivery” creating the vaunted ‘shock and awe’ when “overwhelming force could be delivered to precisely defined targets. (“War, by all Means” 17).

The fantastic promises of RMA warfare—that its total systemic vision allows commanders to capitalize on opponents’ most fleeting moments of vulnerability—requires that the grunts on the ground respond to orders with unquestioning alacrity. Lacking the godlike total strategic vision of their informatized commander, these units must take his commands on faith if they are to seamlessly integrate into the process of “automated weapons delivery.”¹⁷

In *Batman and the Outsiders*, these new relations of command play out through a tension between the military discourse of “need-to-know” and the affective discourses of secrecy and trust. Batman proclaims a clear separation between these two discourses, contingent on a division between personal and professional protocols of interaction. When the team is “off-duty,” Batman can perform the roles of coach, mentor, even friend to the Outsiders. While the team is “working,” however, Batman operates instead as nexus of strategic information flows, the complexity of which he has neither the time nor the inclination to share. The team members become assets to be maneuvered and manipulated to seize momentary tactical advantages. His communication of mission

¹⁷ In James Cameron’s *Aliens* (1986), Lt. Gorman’s command console provides an excellent example of this fantasy of real-time, networked command, as well as the way this technology seeks to subordinate the working class knowledge and agency of the grunts to the cognitive labor of the officer. It is crucial to note that while this setup leads to disaster in the film, the problem lies not in the technology itself, but in Lt. Gorman’s inability to live up to his responsibility as network commander. During the brief period when Ripley takes control of the apparatus, she is able to use it effectively to guide the squad by drawing on her mixed experience of blue- and white-collar labor. In *Aliens*, then, new military technologies of networked asset management rely on the force commander to codeswitch, in affective as well as cognitive labor. As in *Batman and the Outsiders*, crisis comes when one is exerted without the other.

related material is purely instrumental, every interaction seeking to turn the Outsiders into local extensions of his own transcendent strategic agency.

As the ethnically and culturally diverse team members develop elective kinship bonds across their differences, the Outsiders increasingly resent, and resist, the terms of Batman's RMA-style leadership. In keeping with these connections, they want to be mentored in traditional cosmopolitical superheroism, and so they hail Batman as an elder rather than a commander. While they acknowledge Batman's superior knowledge and experience, and thus do not necessarily want to relate to him as peers, they still want his power over them to be framed by strong affective bonds.

Although most of the Outsiders were technically adults, *Batman and the Outsiders's* focus on relationships across difference drew on the teen-outsider dynamics of *Teen Titans* and *The X-Men*. Fawaz argues that *X-Men* established a distinct form of outsider-affiliated cosmopolitical heroism, because it

developed the popular fantasy of the mutant superhero not only to resist a variety of repressive social norms... but also to facilitate new kinds of choices about political affiliation and personal identification [by representing] geographically and ethnically diverse mutants who had formerly struggled to survive independently... reorienting their everyday choices around an ethical commitment to protect on another (147).

Fawaz calls this style of heroism grounded in powerful elective affinities "queer mutaninity," and argues that it both builds on and complicates the universal humanism that anchored the Justice League's cosmopolitics.

Batman's inability to understand or participate in the affective solidarity the Outsiders develop is rooted in his inability to maintain the very distinction between personal and professional that his leadership style invokes. Batman's obsessive focus, the

same “seriousness” that makes him attractive to so many fans, is exaggerated in team books like *Batman and the Outsiders*, *Justice League*, and *JLA*, both because the format removes characters from their home city relationships, and because the ensemble nature of the stories gives characters less time in their “civilian” personae. Because the line between personal and professional is always blurred for Batman, in team books where we see him as Batman almost all the time, his Wayne identity often disappears completely. *Batman and the Outsiders* is one of the first books to dig deeply into this, by pointedly contrasting Batman’s impersonal professional performance with the intensely personal affective bonding of the Outsiders. Several interactions in the *Batman and the Outsiders*’s letter column show how readers responded to this articulation of the Dark Knight as self-abnegating professional. Fan Al Turniansky praised the way *Batman and the Outsiders* writer Mark W. Barr

...managed to portray [Batman] as being obsessed with his work (crimefighting), without falling into the trap of making him seem near psychotic.... Even when he’s “Bruce Wayne,” he’s still “on,” because “Bruce Wayne” isn’t Bruce Wayne, “Bruce Wayne” is a mask... a shadow creature, a construct to throw people off the track by behaving in an unBatmanlike manner, while furthering Batman’s plans and clearing the way for him. Bruce Wayne, the real Bruce Wayne, is submerged, lost.... There is only Batman and “Bruce Wayne,” nothing in between. (*Batman and the Outsiders* #10)

While Turniansky is clearly pleased that the hyper-professional Batman, who is “always ‘on’” successfully avoids seeming “psychotic,” this is clearly still a figure in whom, to use Prieto-Pablas’s phrase again, “the reader’s fears are projected more intensely than their desires” (Ambivalent Hero, 73). As was the case in *Dune*, the specter of uncontrollable, fascistic forms of masculine violence (which Miller would embrace in *The Dark Knight Returns* are abjured in *Batman and the Outsiders* through pursuit of informatized power, but only through recourse to a self-discipline so intense that the

original masculine subject is “submerged” and ultimately “lost.” Only a “shadow creature” remains.

Another reader, John Henry Sain, comments directly on the affective costs of Batman’s rigidly disciplined subjectivity, in which it is impossible to tell which of his instrumentalized performances of self is “real:”

Which is the real man? Not Bruce. As Bruce, he *pretends* to be an egotistical, shallow prettyboy. But as Batman, he must hide behind a mask and assumed name, and always operate on the ragged edge... the man has virtually no “real” identity. This can’t be good for his psyche. (*Batman and the Outsiders* #13)

The editors’ response to Sain shows that his and Turniansky’s diagnosis is correct. In *Batman and the Outsiders* this longstanding tension in the character defines the creators’ whole construction of the character:

John, the prevailing view, as far as the Batman who leads the Outsiders, is that The Batman *is* the real identity and every other guise he assumes—including Bruce Wayne—he views as a valuable, but ultimately expendable, infantryman in his war against crime. (*Batman and the Outsiders* #13)

The split between Bruce Wayne and Batman, which most previous comics and critics alike treated (and still treat) primarily via psychological terms of doubling, repression, and sublimation, is re-articulated in the militarized terms of instrumentality and expendability.

Batman and the Outsiders’s emphasis on instrumental rather than psycho-libidinal roots for Batman’s domineering heroic performance is central to Batman’s development as a power manager over the next two decades, as writers and artists—mostly those working on various incarnations of the Justice League—would continue to develop this interpretation of the Dark Knight as an alternative and response to hard-body versions of the character.

Within the arc of *Batman and the Outsiders*, Batman's commitment to militarized conceptions of professionalism (as transformative discipline, as self-sacrifice) and informatized strategy (as an "always on" vigilance for both risk and opportunity) preclude his ability to participate in the kinds of affective bonding at the heart of the queer solidarity that the Outsiders develop, and that *Batman and the Outsiders* ultimately validates at Batman's expense. In issue #32, tensions between Batman's neoliberal leadership and the team's cosmopolitical ideals come to a head. The Outsiders are incensed that Batman kept the Markovian native Geo-Force from learning of a crisis in his home country because it would have distracted him from Batman's mission priorities. In the confrontation that follows, the team unites in their rejection of Batman's control. In response to their criticism of his leadership, Batman declares that "effective immediately ... the Outsiders are dissolved!" (*Batman and the Outsiders* # 32, 12).

In this moment, the Outsiders recognize that it is their affective bonds and voluntary solidarity that defines them, rather than Batman's leadership. Team member Halo articulates their refusal of his right to dissolve the team: "No! [The Outsiders are] the only family I've got, I don't want to lose you... even without him, we're still the Outsiders, kinda like the Supremes without Diana Ross! We can stay together – on our own!" (*Batman and the Outsiders* # 32, 12). This justification for the group's existence is not grounded in Batman's authority or his goals for the group; rather, it is grounded in the affective solidarity felt by the characters. From this point on, that elective kinship relation will define not only the group's identity, but its ethics and goals as well.

Batman's response seems cold, in keeping with the instrumental relationships his disciplined subjectivity and militaristic leadership style dictate. "Go, then – leave me... it doesn't matter ... soldiers come and go, but my war never ends." (*Batman and the Outsiders* # 32, 14). Yet, even as he seems to confirm his allegiance to everything the team is rejecting in him, the fundamental inconsistency of *Batman and the Outsiders*'s portrayal of the character is evident. The panel where Halo defies his authority and claims self-determination for the Outsiders shows Batman with a concealed smirk, as if he is secretly pleased with their declaration of independence. This panel seems to imply that he knows, at some level, how unhealthy and oppressive his leadership has become, and in turn invites us to question how much of his dictatorial demeanor might have been an act, to ask whether the Outsiders' rejection of his Machiavellian maneuvering was itself *the product* of such maneuvering. Such manipulation would be, on one hand, another layer of deceit, an even deeper and more insidious breach of the Outsiders' trust. On the other hand, it frames that instrumental deceit as ultimately benevolent, a patronizing ploy that forces the Outsiders to recognize their independence and leave the nest. We might read the issue's title, "A New War's Winning" as an indication that this outcome did represent a "win," not for the Outsider's radical affective solidarity, but for Batman's deep strategy and the informatized military metaphors that define his heroism.

Even as *Batman and the Outsiders* stages the Outsiders' rejection of Batman's neoliberal instrumentality, then, it hesitates in its condemnation of the Dark Knight himself, holding out the possibility that his bad behavior might ultimately, secretly be acceptably heroic after all. But little else in the final issue—let alone the rest of the

series—supports such a reading, and so the result is not nuance or complexity but confusion. This hesitation shows how, pre-*Crisis*, DC was still unsure how to reconcile the character—and the neoliberal modes of power he represented—to its narrative universe and the cognitive map of the social it represents.

Batman and the Outsiders, then, marks the beginning of Batman’s operation as the fulcrum of DC’s transition towards the normalization of neoliberal heroism. His emerging style of power management—linked to the fantasies of RMA discourse—makes him an effective tactical commander, but in *Batman and the Outsiders* it fails to secure his dominance over the Outsiders, or to allow him to define their approach to heroism. While Batman’s ruthless, instrumental performance creates a distinctive aura of professionalism and “seriousness,” ultimately *Batman and the Outsiders* prioritizes affective solidarity of cosmopolitical heroism over that seriousness. Batman and the fantasy of speculative military power he represents are both judged incompatible with the affective structure of the superteam, and banished back into the shadows. When Batman returns to the Justice League after the *Crisis*, his attempts at militarized leadership are thwarted by the machinations of an even more explicit avatar of finance ontology.

2.2.2 The Superhero as Speculative Laborer:

The Strange Case of Maxwell Lord in *Justice League International* (1987)

At first glance, Batman does essentially the same work in Keith Giffen and J.M. DeMatteis’s post-*Crisis* series *Justice League* (1987): he represents the informatized military practices of the Revolution in Military Affairs, and the unilateral “cowboy” foreign policy of the Reagan Administration. Narratively, his need to exert control over the team creates drama which drives the plot. However, in *Justice League* the clear

oppositions between Batman's neoliberalism and traditional cosmopolitical ideals that structured *Batman and the Outsiders* collapse. Whereas Batman's approach to heroism worked as a foil to a cosmopolitical position ultimately endorsed in *Batman and the Outsiders*, in *Justice League* his neoliberal approach to power takes over the League itself. Similarly, while the Outsiders were able to defeat and banish the specter of nationalistic violence in the Force of July, in *Justice League* that perspective is espoused by a member of the team, disgraced former Green Lantern Hal Jordan, who acts as a "heel" by aggressively voicing the bigotry and nationalism of Reaganite conservatism, often in an attempt to shame and denigrate the other members of the team.

While in *Batman and the Outsiders*, cosmopolitics ultimately triumphed in its struggle against both neoliberal individualism and instrumental relationality, in *Justice League* that contest is always-already lost. Unlike the classic league of equals Batman left, the group he leads in *Justice League* includes major differences in prestige, experience, and temperament among its members. League veterans Batman and Martian Manhunter are joined by an unruly cast of characters who have little trust in Batman, or in each other. Unlike in *Batman and the Outsiders*, where Batman's leadership was contrasted with the affective bonding the Outsiders performed, the fractious new League shows little indication that it is capable of such affective self-direction. Instead, it is clear that strong management must impose order if this contentious team is to function at all. The question, then, is not whether this new Justice League can grow into a new democratic team of equals. Instead, the question is what form of authority can "tame" the divergent personalities and suborn them to a common purpose. The first twelve issues pit

two approaches to neoliberal domination against each other: the “hard” power of RMA-style military command personified by Batman, and the “soft” power of financial ontology personified by Bruce Wayne’s twisted double, the entrepreneurial mastermind Max Lord IV. The rest of the League are reduced both to being pawns in that management struggle, and to anxious employees keeping their heads down and hoping to keep their jobs as the team is “restructured.”

We open the story with Batman establishing his dominance over the fractious team. Frank Miller had just re-worked the character into a dark, obsessive fascist a year before in the *Dark Knight Returns*, and the in-continuity Batman was still calibrating how much of that intensity and menace would inhere in the character going forward. While he is not as deranged as Miller’s Dark Knight, in *Justice League* intimidation is still Batman’s favored approach with allies and foes alike. In *Batman and the Outsiders*, Batman’s leadership style alternated awkwardly between domineering technocrat and paternal sponsorship. In *Justice League*, he again tries to lead in the top-down, militarized, need-to-know style of a special ops team. But this time, the veneer of mentorship is gone. Rather than seeing the other Leaguers as mentees to be trained, Batman treats his fellow heroes as employees, and disappointing ones at that. Using his claims to professionalism as cover, Batman belittles other League members’ abilities and bullies them into line with threats.

As was the case in *Batman and the Outsiders*, in *Justice League* Batman’s overbearing leadership can be read as an attempt to think through, in the terms of popular fantasy, new structures of power associated with the neoliberal military discourse called

the Revolution in Military Affairs. In *Justice League*, Batman's command style creates issues similar to those Martin diagnoses as the ends of US military policy shifted from Cold War containment to Imperial hegemony. "Limited" interventions like the Invasion of Grenada and the first Gulf War showed how "a forward-deploying logic of leveraged investment would replace the old savings plan of mutually assured destruction" (Martin, *Indifference* 102). While the nuclear calculus of the Cold War revolved around this existential threat, in the 1980s and 1990s America turned to more finely tuned displays of force to maintain its hegemonic power over Third World nations who were not rivals, but also not allies. Authority over such parties is not established through the sheer world-destroying *capacity* of nuclear mega-tonnage. Rather, Martin argues, in the new doctrine, "the appearance of global dominance is maintained by relatively small investments with large multiplier effects" (*Indifference* 46).

Batman's authority within *Justice League* is maintained through just such small moments of menace and intimidation. As in the logic of Grenada and Gulf War 1, Batman's authority rests on a strategic "deterrence" that requires periodic examples be made. "Enemies are to be defeated before they can make their antagonism manifest. Contingencies for the future are to be lived out in the present... by converting potential threats into actual conflicts" (*Indifference* 3). By acting preemptively, speculative military strategy seeks to deter other actors from "antagonism" by performing an arbitrage of force. The promoters of RMA doctrine promised that the dangers associated with old-style total war between co-equal nation states, and the costs of traditional colonial occupation, could both be managed by instigating smaller, precisely targeted

military actions. “The volatility of [full scale] war is isolated and contained by concentrated and precise interventions [...] surgical strikes [that] are leveraged to the larger strategic ambitions of the entire war theatre” (*Indifference* 10). Because the audience for such leveraged military performances extends beyond the actual recipient of the strikes, the threats being preempted may have little obvious relationship to the highly visible action itself. As Martin argues, this disruption between the specific military intervention and its multiplying effects gives this form of preemption the logic of the derivative: The meaning or value of the military “transaction” resides less in its original context, than in the fact that it signifies a willingness to “repay” specific forms of behavior with force at a future time.

While it is easy to see how this logic of preemptive deterrence animates Batman’s terroristic approach to vigilantism, in *Justice League*, it also forms the foundation of Batman’s approach to leading the fractured team. Hal Jordan’s performance as “heel” on the team puts him in the position of a “rogue state” that Batman polices on behalf of the rest of the League, demonstrating the moral legitimacy of his leadership and his right to force. But in so doing, Batman also implicitly establishes his right to police the heroic performances of the rest of the group, and demonstrates the violent means by which he would do so.¹⁸

¹⁸ The confrontation between Batman and Jordan in *Justice League* #1 is one of the more famous panels in DC history. It was, for instance, reproduced in the *DC Heroes Roleplaying Game* to illustrate the concept of intimidation as a heroic skill. Similarly, many fan letters raved about a sequence in *Justice League* #5 where Batman punches Jordan into unconsciousness. While we can read these scenes as showing how the “serious” representatives of neoliberal power are capable of subordinating the immature, id-like drives of nationalism and bigotry, the dramatic escalation of violence between the two shows that this balance

Yet if we view Batman's disciplinary violence as a form of futures contract, it is a much riskier approach to regulating other heroes compared to simply deterring the criminal. It is a promise to meet future resistance with violence at a certain "exchange rate." Because Jordan's resistance to Batman's power is animated by his own chauvinism and narcissistic love for power, Batman risks little committing to meet Hal's future challenges with escalating violence. Jordan's abrasiveness and unpopularity mean that Batman can be assured that such repression will be well received by the rest of the League, regardless of the context in which future "exchanges" will be made. However, if Batman follows through on the implication that he will "repay" other Leaguer's resistance with a similar violence, the context or "market conditions" at that moment of exchange could result in a very different "value" for Batman's authoritarian violence. Indeed, forcing Batman to "default" on his promise of repressive violence is central to Maxwell Lord's challenge to Batman's leadership of the League.

While Batman's paramilitary leadership has clearly replaced the egalitarian ethos of the old League, then, it is presented as an inadequate substitute. Batman is able to force the team into action despite their many difficulties, but he seems unable to resolve those issues, and his control over the team is precarious: he must continually re-establish his dominance through escalating violence. While many fans reacted positively to Batman's confrontations with Jordan, his recourse to violent discipline is portrayed overall as a liability for the League, creating a sense of perpetual emergency and

between "responsible" conservatism and riotous populism is precarious and must be continually re-asserted, which is a fair assessment about the course of right-wing politics in the 1980s and 90s.

imminent crisis—the familiar environment created by neoliberal management in both military and corporate arenas.

The first issue establishes Batman’s shaky leadership, as he is able (barely) to lead the team through a high-profile crisis involving a terrorist attack on the UN. But even as the League succeeds in stopping the terrorists, the closing panel reveals that the UN attack is part of a larger plot by the businessman Maxwell Lord. These closing panels in Issue #1 seem to position Lord as the new nemesis for the fractured team, a Moriarty against which the Bat Detective will develop his leadership. Rather than using the struggle with Lord to validate Batman’s leadership and unite the team under his command, though, the struggle puts the limitations of Batman’s militaristic approach on full display.

The phrase used to tease the next issue, “make war no more,” hints at the depth of Lord’s challenge to Batman. It implies that Lord will move the terms of struggle beyond the military framework that is the foundation of Batman’s heroism, onto more explicitly financialized terrain of information warfare, where influence and manipulation count for more than the physical violence that ultimately secures Batman’s authority in *Justice League*. Their struggle will, ultimately, be about the changing meaning of violence and control in the neoliberal era.

Briefing the other League members on the threat Lord poses, Batman warns that “there’s more to our millionaire entrepreneur than meets the eye” (*Justice League* #4, pg

2).¹⁹ He would certainly know. As a wealthy businessman and scion of a business family (Max Lord IV), Lord serves as a double for Batman's oft-neglected alter-ego, Bruce Wayne. The struggle between Batman and Lord, then, can also be seen as a recalibration of the relationship between these two sides of Batman's persona, which seeks to account for neoliberalism's elevation of the entrepreneurial investor as the ideal subject.

As we saw in *Batman and the Outsiders* above, the consensus among both creators and fans had long been drifting towards the position of Wayne-as-fiction, the idea that Batman regarded the Wayne identity as little more than a strategic cover and a bank account. While Denny O'Neil "deliberately play[ed] up the James Bond notes in Wayne's character" during the 1970s (Weldon 159), those "notes" were Bond's jet-setting lifestyle and debonair masculinity, rather than his espionage skills. During this time Wayne also became a more active manager of his money, using the resources of Wayne Enterprises, as well as the philanthropic Wayne Foundation, to fund programs that could prevent the crime the Dark Knight spent his nights battling. But in both its jet-setting and its philanthropy, the Wayne identity remained a mask with a charge card, a puppet whose movements were defined by the training and goals of the Batman identity.

Weldon argues that despite "the widespread tendency, among nerds and normal alike, to dismiss the impact of Bruce Wayne's billionaire status... of course that wealth is Batman's true superpower. Its narrative function, in any Batman story, is to turn the flatly

¹⁹ In our own time of skyrocketing wealth inequality, it is important to point out that, in the late 1980s, being a millionaire was still a big deal. Colloquially, "millionaire" then carried the same elite connotations that "billionaire" does today. For this reason, diegetic reports of Bruce Wayne's wealth tend to scale with inflation, so that he becomes a billionaire in the comics of the 21st century, as seen in the Weldon quote about his wealth below.

impossible into the vaguely plausible. It works, essentially, as magic” (*Caped Crusade*, 3). Not only does Wayne’s fortune pay for the gadgets, the car, and the cave; more importantly, it gives him the free time and the resources to undertake the years of intense training that created The Batman. Batman is a fantasy of human capital, and at heart of that fantasy is the hard truth that it takes a lot of capital to so intensively develop one’s human capital.

It is one thing to note how Wayne’s financial *resources* are necessary to develop the human capital project called “Batman.” It is another to argue that financial *logic* could or should define that project’s lines of development. In Max Lord, we see the stirrings of a new relation between Batman and Bruce Wayne: the idea that Wayne’s financial *skillset* might be useful to a superheroic project. In Lord’s hands, finance is not merely a precondition for developing superpowerful agency; finance operates *in itself* as that agency. His skills as an investor *are* his superpower. In his confrontation with the Justice League, not only Lord’s wealth, but his capacities as a manager of assets, affects, and information is put in direct conflict with the more militant physical skillset Bruce Wayne invested his own assets to develop. In short, Max Lord threatens to reveal “Batman” as a mismanaged project, a waste of financial skills and assets that are ultimately more effective in themselves as tools of compulsion and control.

Lord’s function as Bruce Wayne’s nefarious double shifts rapidly in issues #2-4, as it becomes clear that his goal is not to destroy the League, but something much more insidious. In an exemplary display of business ontology, Lord’s distinctly corporate strategy so overmatches the traditional heroic tactics of the league that Lord stages what

is effectively a hostile takeover of the group. Leaving the physical challenges of tactical field command to Batman, Lord establishes himself instead as the JLA's publicist and manager, the Charlie to their Angels, concentrating on the strictly cognitive and affective "strategic" labors of mission selection, recruiting, political lobbying, and brand management. Like Batman, Lord grounds his authority by appealing to a kind of professionalism, but that professionalism is modeled not on military discipline and RMA discourse, but on the financial values of the swashbuckling "corporate raiders" whose mergers and acquisitions were remaking corporate America in the 1980s.

Not only does Lord usurp Batman's role as ultimate leader for the group by out-strategizing him, and reframing Batman's tactical command role as subordinate, but in a crucial scene in issue #4, Lord also shows himself to be uniquely immune to the Dark Knight's legendary powers of intimidation. In *Justice League* #1, Batman silenced Hal Jordan with a single, silent glare. In the panels where Batman first confronts Lord directly, that confrontation with Jordan from the first issue is recreated almost exactly in the panel layout, coloring, and expressions (*Justice League* #4, sp 4). The "seriousness" of the threat projected by Batman is indicated, not only in the framing of the panel sequence, but by an anonymous word bubble that contains the fearful exclamation "...uh-oh..." in very small print. Not only the readers, but the characters watching the interaction, expect Lord to be deterred by Batman's promise of violence. But where Jordan quailed in the face of Batman's threat, Lord is nonplussed. He simply ignores the threat and claims the mantle of maturity and "seriousness" for himself. "You're upset, Batman. I can see that.... Let's talk about this like reasonable men." Batman's response,

“But I’m not a reasonable man,” is an attempt to recover the dread authority that had served him so well—up to and including the preceding panel. But it is too late, and his need to resort to verbally declaring that he is not willing to talk is proof of how badly he has lost control of the situation.

To *actually* resort to the violence his menacing performance is structured to *imply* would only further demonstrate the extent to which Batman has lost control, both of the situation, *and of the meaning of his own heroic performance*. Lord punctures Batman’s strategy of deterrence and renders him ridiculous by *calling his bluff*. His indifference to Batman’s deterrent violence is devastating, in large part, because he performs it so publically. Lord has maneuvered Batman into a situation in which he can not only disregard Batman’s primary claim to authority, but he can *model that disregard* for the rest of the team. The effectiveness of this strategy can be seen in Booster Gold’s bemused reaction to Max’s response in the next panel. Lord’s patronizing tone and posture re-frame Batman’s hypermasculine performance as immature, ridiculous, and theatrical—as camp. Representing Batman’s attempt to perform menace as campily excessive, Lord strips the Dark Knight of his mantle of “seriousness” and takes it for himself.

Lord anticipated that Batman would attempt to counter his influence with a performance of deterrent threat. Batman makes a gamble on his own reputation, a speculative gamble that derives its value from his own previous violence against Hal Jordan. He bets on the others believing that he is “not a reasonable man” and therefore willing to “repay” Lord’s challenge to his authority with retributive violence. But Lord’s calculated, public indifference means puts Batman in the situation where that threat of

future violence must be made good in the present, within a set of conditions in which either performing that violence *or* withholding it would *both* diminish Batman's stature and magnify Lord's advantage. Batman was, in effect, shorting his own stock, and Lord has caught him out.²⁰ The speculative techniques of finance are thus turned against the speculative strategies of RMA style warfare. Just as Batman used speculative violence to subordinate the other heroes, here he is subordinated by Lord's own speculative gambit. Finance subordinates force as the dominant aspect of power in the neoliberal imaginary, and as the idealized approach to performing interpersonal dominance as the Reagan era closed and the ambiguous interregnum of the first Bush Administration began.

While Batman's militarized strategy is based on the speculative violence of new notions of "flexible warfare," the authoritarian model of military command he performs is out of step with new styles of business leadership associated with "flexible capitalism." In *The Corrosion of Character*, Sennett argues that within new neoliberal forms of corporate discourse that emphasize "soft skills of communication, facilitation, and mediation [...] authority disappears" (109). Sennett does not mean that power disappears, but rather that there has been a shift in which performances of power are recognized as legitimate. "Authority of the sort which self-confidently proclaims 'This is the right way!' or 'Obey me, because I know what I'm talking about!'" is not long able to "justify [its] command; the powerful only 'facilitate' and enable others" (*Corrosion* 109). In

²⁰ Shorting stock is the speculative practice of selling "borrowed" shares you don't own at a certain price, because you believe you will be able to acquire replacements at a lower price. Batman was attempting to "sell" a much greater level of violent action than he was actually willing to enact *in the confrontation with Lord*. Had his bluff worked, rather than "making good" his promise by beating up Lord, he would instead be able to "make good" that promise in a later, lower stakes confrontation with Jordan.

Justice League, Batman's performances as a leader follow precisely the scripts Sennett argues were losing their legitimacy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While Batman's overall tactical approach to superheroism as the leveraged projection of force reflects the latest innovations in military doctrine, this strategic vision has not been effectively coupled with the latest contemporary corporate strategies for affective management.

The confrontation between Batman and Lord, then, shows how neoliberal management practices would, moving into the 1990s, increasingly obscure its concentrated power by an exaggerated performance of that power's decentralization. Despite the fact that Lord is staging a hostile takeover of the group, redefining not only its membership and its mission, but also its very name, he styles himself as a facilitator rather than a dictator, a team member rather than a boss. He appeals to the neoliberal redefinitions of "teamwork" and "governance," which diffuse his accountability for the situation without removing his power to structure it. By announcing his desire to persuade rather than compel ("let's talk about this like reasonable men"), Lord obscures the extent to which his manipulation of both the situation and his interlocutor's knowledge of it predetermine the "reasonable" outcome of such deliberation. As was the case with Paul's approach to power in *Dune*, Max combines a sensitive, context specific batch-production of affect with a the nuanced manipulation of his and other's knowledge of and choices within the systemic environment—the core techniques of power management.

Having defeated Batman and established himself as team manager, Lord continues to employ financialized techniques of subterfuge and misdirection to

accomplish his goals for the League. By manipulating information networks and defining the structural conditions in which others make their decisions, he is able to recruit new members of his choosing to the league, takes over their relations with the public and the press, and then engineers their gaining official UN sanction as a rechristened Justice League International. The last change, in particular, shows how Lord is attentive to the threat neoliberal logics pose to the cosmopolitical underpinnings of the Justice League. If the League can no longer secure its moral authority through its egalitarian decision-making or the unimpeachable personal morality of its members—problems the infighting and drama of *Justice League* amply demonstrate—then how can a Justice League of *America* be trusted to operate any differently than the Force of July did in *Batman and the Outsiders*? What relation can the Justice League have to international action, other than the enforcement of American interests?

By re-structuring the team as Justice League International, Lord acknowledges these issues in the League's credibility. But rather than attempt to reestablish the League's ideological commitment to radical internationalism and universal human rights, he opts for a more cynical strategy of triangulation. By seeking official recognition from the UN, Lord abandons the old League's claim to a *transcendent* global citizenship, declaring instead that the League's superpolitics are functionally co-extensive with global *realpolitique*. Lord solicits new team members, Captain Atom and Rocket Red, who will openly speak for the interests of the US and the USSR, giving both superpowers a "voice" in the League and a stake in its success—as well as an incentive to manipulate the team for their own national interests. Abandoning the Leagues' traditional claim to a

global responsibility that transcended state politics has the effect of volatizing both the interpersonal relations between the superhumans on the team, and the human political situations in which the team intervenes. Yet, as Brown, Martin, and Sennett have all argued, a key part of neoliberalism as a social project is the normalization of such structural chaos, and the ideal entrepreneurial subject is expected to thrive in such volatile conditions.

Much of Randy Martin's work documents the ways that financialized modes of governance based on leveraging and risk management actually serve to proliferate the forms of economic and political threats they purport to contain—and how this rising tide of chaos, in turn, is used as justification for ever more intensive regimes of speculative management by the technocratic elite. Brown argues that even as neoliberal policy destabilizes both public and private life, citizens are increasingly expected to navigate that chaos on their own. Brown calls this “responsibilization,” a “bundling of agency and blame, [through which] the individual is ... expected to fend for itself (and so blamed for its failure to thrive) and is expected to act for the well-being of the economy (and blame for *its* failure to thrive)” (*Undoing* 134).²¹ But amidst the creative destruction of late capitalism, it is increasingly difficult to fulfill one's this obligation, because “the correct

²¹ The American healthcare system is a good example of responsibilization. Not only is each individual legally “mandated” to secure their own health coverage in order to protect their own wellbeing, but they are also subject to a variety of official and unofficial pressures to maintain their bodies in the name of corporate and national efficiency. “Unhealthy” behaviors, from smoking to non-normative sex, are stigmatized less because of their impact on the individual than their effect on the perceived efficiency of the system as a whole. The structural inequalities and absurdities of the system are eluded beneath a moralized discourse that figures those who can't or won't regulate their own bodies and behaviors are “free-riders” and “cheats,” authorizing their subjection to various regimes of surveillance, incentive, and punishment on behalf of the virtuously healthy, who have “Earned” both their freedom from such regulation, and from the burden of supporting those who don't measure up.

strategies of self-investment” are only available to those who already possess social privilege (*Undoing* 133). As Fisher argues, “many have simply buckled” under the pressure of navigating “the terrifyingly unstable conditions of Post-Fordism” (*Capitalist Realism* 37). Yet what he calls the “the privatization of stress” within the neoliberalism’s regime of responsabilization means that “it is incumbent on individuals” to manage their own distress (19).

In *The Corrosion of Character*, Richard Sennett discussed the disorienting effect of living and *working* within this culture of responsabilization and perpetual disruption, and *Justice League*’s depiction of the late 1980s fits his description exactly. Lord’s strategy for leading the Justice League followed the contemporary logic of business reorganization that was remaking corporate culture in the 1980s, the restless drive towards what Sennett calls “discontinuous reinvention” (47): Lord acquires the Justice League in a hostile takeover, rebrands it as Justice League International, and then sets about re-organizing its employee base and institutional structure. Lord’s leadership struggle with Batman focuses less on what the League should be doing (in terms of the targets for the team’s interventions) than on whose vision will define the League’s restructuring. This management struggle unleashes the full potential of “the powers of chaos disguised by that seemingly assuring word ‘reengineering’” (Sennett 51). When organizations exist in such a state of perpetual flux, Sennett argues, it seems useless to “attempt rational decision making about one’s future based on the current structure” one lives within (85). The result is a sense of helpless precarity, what Fisher called “reflexive impotence,” and this is what we see in the new membership of the Justice League. With

the leadership, membership, organizational structure, and ultimate goals of the League in chaotic flux, they can do little more than make nervous jokes and wait to see which managerial vision will prevail.

Even before Lord's takeover, though, the team members viewed one another more as fellow employees than as elective family. The heroes of the League do not invest their affect in the League as a source of identity and belonging, as the *Outsiders* did, but view it as a prestigious but ultimately temporary job. Both Mister Miracle and Booster Gold value their participation in the League primarily as an impressive CV line, one more step in a larger career. Booster thinks League membership would be "a feather in my cap," bringing fame and celebrity (*JL* #4). Miracle's "personal manager" Oberon makes a similar connection, "when word of [your League membership] gets out, your box office receipts will *skyrocket!*" (*JL* #1). In Justice League what we see are the weak ties of modern professional acquaintance, developed for a situation in which one expects to drift from one "project" to another, pulling up and replanting affective roots along the way (Sennett 18-30). Lord's struggle with Batman for leadership and his mysterious plans for the team simply accelerate and exacerbate this tendency.

Brown, Fisher, and Sennett's discussion of the fraught affective register of responsibilized life and labor are important not only for appreciating the cultural context of Lord's style of corporate control, but also for interpreting the humor that defined most readers' reception of the comic at the time. *Justice League* was often funny, but I argue that its comedy does not disrupt the book's ability to project the "seriousness" that fans of the time craved. Paradoxically, its comedy actually boosted that seriousness, because

what we see in *Justice League* is the particular humor of white collar office culture, which revolves around attempts to manage both the anxiety of occupational precarity amid institutional reorganization, and the awkwardness that comes from the intimate superficiality of professional relationships. What might at first come across as silliness and levity, then, actually registers the distinctive dismal psychic toll of laboring within neoliberal capitalism. The ostensible “lightness” of *Justice League*’s tone has the same effect Fisher detects in the darkness of LA noir: the sense of “‘realism’ is somehow underscored, rather than undercut” by the emotionally hyperbolic representation (Fisher 11). The playful banter between Blue Beetle and Booster Gold, which provides much of the “fun” in the series, expresses what Sennett identified as the ironic sensibility of modern white collar work (*Corrosion* 119). Their ironic joking “does not stimulate people to challenge power,” but rather, “because of their very superficiality of content and focus on the immediate moment, their avoidance of resistance and deflection of confrontation, [these jokes are] useful in the exercise of domination” (*Corrosion* 115-6). At bottom, their laughter expresses the desire for recognition by authority, rather than revolution against it.

What is surprising is that despite the way *Justice League* foregrounds the affective costs of the chaos and insecurity caused by Lord’s volatilizing style of financial management, most of his decisions as leader of the team prove to be genuinely effective, resolving issues that Batman would or could not. For the first six issues, then, there is every indication that the Max’s style of power—one based entirely in his cognitive labor of financial speculation—is indeed a superior approach to managing superpowers for the

common good. Though the indirect, often outright deceptive practices Max employs seem like the very opposite of comic heroism, they are presented as more effective, and better able to navigate the complexities of 1980s media and politics, than both Batman's Reaganite RMA antics *and* the higher-minded traditions of silver age heroism. But *Justice League* (rechristened *Justice League International* in issue #7) ultimately tries to reject finance ontology's hostile takeover of superheroism, and it does so by displacing the locus of financialized power from Lord-as-financier, onto the tools of finance themselves. This is done by changing Lord's relationship to the technology through which his financial mastery was initially established: that ubiquitous symbol of the new information society, the bank of monitors.

Max's character arc revolves around this iconic image of the speculative immaterial labor at the heart of financial power. The first image we see of Max Lord shows his profile against a bank of screens, inviting us to take on his perspective and try to guess what meaning he finds in the interplay of the images—an invitation to perform the immaterial labor that defines his character.

Many readers will recognize this setup from another iconic comic image: Ozymandias "reading" a bank of television screens in *Watchmen* #10. *Justice League* and *Watchmen* were in press at the same time. *Justice League* #1, which introduces Max Lord, is dated May 1987. *Watchmen* #10 is dated July of that year. This uncanny mirroring of imagery in two of the founding works of the new DC canon is evidence that a reckoning with the possibility of financialized power was an existential issue for DC's post-Crisis continuity. Whether the creators were working this through consciously

or not, this image resonates as a potent dream image of the ascendant form of socioeconomic mastery.²² In both *Watchmen* and *JLA*, struggle against He Who Masters Through Monitors—and through him, against the speculative powers he represents—is crucial to defining what heroism meant in the high neoliberal moment of 1987.

As Robert Goldman and Steven Papson argue in their study of corporate advertising, *Landscapes of Capital*, the bank of monitors is a favorite self-image of the financial class, signifying their superior knowledge of the complex market system. Advertising “campaigns for investment firms especially stress a world moving at warp speed while their elite ... bankers calmly survey it for ‘opportunities’” (*Landscapes* 75). As was the case with Ozymandias in *Watchmen*, it is through this finance-linked image of technocratic control that Max demonstrates superior knowledge of, and his control over, the narrative world of *Justice League*.²³

It is important to distinguish between the two valences of this powerful image. In “Seeing the Present, Grasping the Future,” I argued that these monitors signify different

²² As Kevin J. Maroney pointed out to me, it is quite possible that *Justice League* creators “had access to the [*Watchmen*] scripts—it was common knowledge that when Moore scripts arrived at DC, *everyone* stopped what they were doing to read them.... Also, before *WATCHMEN* launched, DC had a series of house ads each featuring one of the six main characters” (“re: comics advice”). The Ozymandias house ad Maroney indicated does indeed feature Ozymandias gazing at the monitors, showing that this was a defining characteristic of the character for both the *Watchmen* creators and DC, as well as increasing the likelihood that that the *Justice League* team was responding directly to the character.

²³ While *Watchmen*’s influence has been well-documented, much of that discussion has focused on Rorschach and the neo-noir grinddarkery he inspired. In contrast, the lasting influence of Ozymandias as an exemplar of financial ontology is mostly relegated to asides and footnotes. When critics discuss the character, they are almost always talking about something—anything—else (see Klock 65-66, 72-75 and Hobereck 54-62 for representative examples). A close examination of Maxwell Lord goes a long way towards filling in this gap in the conversation, not only because he mirrors Ozymandias in so many respects, but because he does so inside the official continuity of the DC universe. While *Watchmen*’s Adrian Veidt can remain a provocation, *Justice League* must ultimately find a way to deal directly with Lord’s challenge to traditional heroism. We can watch characters define their new, post-crisis relationships to financialized power “in real time” so to speak through their interactions with Lord.

forms of “vision” depending on what images they are shown to display. On one hand, banks of monitors are often directly linked to surveillance equipment such as CCTV cameras, “which would stabilize the relations between the various scenes and show their relation to each other in ‘real time.’ Such a vision disciplines the disparate locales and flows, defining them as a discreet, integrated system totally and simultaneously available to the viewer” (Pearson 128). The fantasy of “seeing the present” in this totalizing, panoptic way not only accords with the position of productive capital, explored in the article, but also with the “total information awareness” of RMA discourse, which promises to pierce at last the fog of war.

The other valence of the Monitor Bank, however, is less interested in what *is*, than in what *will be*. As an image of the *speculative* vision of financial capital, the bank of monitors derives its knowledge not from panoptic surveillance, but from *flânerie* (Pearson 121-3, 128-9). The screens do not create a totalizing simultaneity; they create an image space in which the power manager’s gaze can freely circulate. This is what we see in both *Watchmen* and *Justice League*, where the screens display the riotous cacophony of the popular media. Ozymandias and Max Lord are not monitoring the action *on* each screen, but looking for patterns and connections *among (or across)* those screens. In *Watchmen* Ozymandias explains how he uses “multi-screen viewing” with “random channel change every hundred seconds” to discover “subliminal hints of the future.... meanings coalesce from semiotic chaos” (#9, 1).²⁴ While Max Lord does not comment so

²⁴ Veidt’s technique of televisual *flânerie* here clearly derives from the cut-up technique popularized by William S. Burroughs. The image of Veidt reading the wall of screens is almost certainly a visual reference

directly on his viewing habits in *Justice League*, the content of his monitor bank shows a mix of news and entertainment programs, including *Star Trek* and *Looney Toons*.

Divining “hints of the future” from such juxtapositions is a crucial part of Max’s spectacular immaterial super-labor in *Justice League*, granting him the financial vision to first out-plan and out-maneuver, and then dominate and subjugate the Justice League.²⁵

While the monitor bank starts off as an instrument through which Max Lord exercises his own abilities, a potent symbol for his potent powers, by issue 12, it will become instead the instrument of his destruction. In issues 7-12, the monitor bank is both animated and demonized, becoming the embodiment of a rogue AI. No longer an object which mediates Max’s spectacular labor, the monitor bank becomes instead a spectacular subject, a financial monster in its own right. Though some panels imply partnership or even companionship between Max and his artificially intelligent financial tool (much in the style of Dillinger and Master Control in Lisberger’s 1982 techno-fantasy *Tron*), ultimately Max’s position shifts from being the one who *uses* the monitoring system to surveil the world, to being *subject to* an independent system that does the surveilling all on its own.

to *The Man who Fell to Earth* (Roeg 1976)—as Kevin Maroney notes, Moore was a fan of both Roeg and the film’s star David Bowie, and had discussed the film’s influence on other aspects of *Watchmen*. Yet within the financializing context of the 1980s, as I describe it here, the image takes on new connotations beyond its countercultural origins.

²⁵ It is important to note that both Ozymandias and Max Lord also utilize their monitor banks to display surveillance footage of those they are manipulating. However, in both cases, the monitors are introduced as tools of financial *flânerie* first. Also, it is important to note that the fully realized power manager, like Paul in *Dune*, is able to employ both surveillance and *flânerie*, to see the present and to grasp the future. *Justice League* is structured by the opposition of Lord to Batman, financial vision to militaristic surveillance, but the fact that Lord is a double of Bruce Wayne forecasts Batman’s transformation into a true power manager once the distinction between financial and military currents of neoliberal development collapses in 90s texts *Kingdom Come* and *JLA*.

This change in Max's power position is, in large part, because his interaction with the screens is no longer one of cognitive labor. Knowledge of the future is no longer something Max produces himself, but a product he consumes, and as a result both the product and the process that produces it are moved outside his understanding and his control. Rather than serving as a *means* by which Max labors to produce the superior knowledge of the market reality that allows him to pre-empt the agency of others, the screen itself performs that labor on his behalf.

The AI is revealed as the real architect of Lord's "master plan." Lord himself goes from the prime mover, to an employee grumbling about being "the last one to find out" about his robot masters' real actions and intentions (*Justice League International* #7, sp 21). The logics of financial capitalism, then, have rapidly shifted from being figured as pathways to a transhuman *ubermensch*-hood, to a form of lesser but still powerful prosthetic enhancement, to a dangerous form of enslavement. Max is reduced to being the "puppet," of a demonic fiscal entity (*Justice League International* #12, sp 8). The processes that produce actionable knowledge about the market have become as volatile and unpredictable as the market itself, and the information they produce engenders dependence rather than agency when acting in that market. Like Paul Atreides in *Dune*, Max succeeds in dominating others, but is himself dominated by the "terrible purpose" of finance.

This displacement of morally problematic financialized superpower from Max to the Monitor set up a spectacle of full on renunciation and exorcism as the arc comes to a head in issue #12, in which Max repudiates his disavowed, displaced financial power,

destroying his bad “other” in a ritual of death and rebirth. Plot shenanigans conspire to confine the AI to a single processor, where it can be easily and permanently destroyed by Max, while Max’s body, damaged in an assassination attempt, is kept alive only by the AI’s power. Destroying the AI is tantamount to killing himself. Yet, though this linkage merges Max physically to his displaced financial other, he has completed his moral and intellectual separation from it, a separation he articulates in classic Jeckle-and-Hyde terms: “that damned machine ... it’s like every bit of darkness in my own soul is tied up in it” (*Justice League International* #12, sp 18). His destruction of the AI is figured as an act of ritual suicide, purging his soul—and the JLA—of the taint of financialized superheroism. In typical comics fashion, Max’s death does not stick. The computer is dead, but the man rises again, reborn as a morally acceptable member of the superhero community. Purged of his complicity with the financial machine, Lord is accepted back into the League.²⁶

The rise and fall of Max Lord performs complicated narrative and political work in *Justice League*. In the course of their struggle, *both* exemplars of neoliberal heroism—Batman and Max—are ultimately defeated. Financier Lord outperforms and subjugates Batman and the neoliberal military discourses he represents. Yet Max’s fall also shows that while finance is a master discourse able to dominate all others, it is ultimately unable

²⁶ Max is later infected with a virus that gives him the “mutant power” to psychically compel others to follow Max’s commands—articulated as a psychic “push” lifted shamelessly from Steven King’s *Firestarter*. up with that? Why must financialized control be exorcized, when psychic domination is not only acceptable, but proliferates within comic narratives? Perhaps because making it a fantastical bodily ability rather than an effect of technique distances it from the real world implications of finance? Or because when financialized power is re-articulated as biological mutation, it becomes more compatible with the structures of “queer mutanity” Fawaz discussed?

to rule, and is destroyed by its own inner conflicts and contradictions. Stepping into the space of crisis left by Lord and Batman's struggle, Martian Manhunter's performance of leadership anticipates the triangulating "third-way" politics of Clinton and Blair. His leadership style defines itself by his avoidance of their excesses, while quietly incorporating many of their techniques. The result anticipates the 1990s *JLA*'s embrace of the depoliticizing neoliberal discourse of "governance" that Wendy Brown warns against in *Undoing the Demos*.

In the course its first twelve issues, *Justice League* disavowed, displaced, and ultimately exorcised its avatar of finance ontology. Yet the shadow of neoliberalism remained because the Lord/AI hybrid had outmatched and outmaneuvered the JLA, not only as their adversary, but on their own turf of superheroism. Ozymandias's challenge remains unanswered. This would largely remain the case until the late 1990s, when the logics of speculative finance and neoliberal governmentality are combined in a fully informatized Dark Knight. Under his influence finance ontology would finally and totally claim the soul of the Justice League, and through them, the DC universe as whole.

2.3 Power Management on the Cusp of Dominance in Clinton's America: Nostalgia, Faith, and Virtuous Competition in *Kingdom Come* (1996)

Read today, Mark Waid and Alex Ross's 1996 miniseries *Kingdom Come* comes across as moralistic and self-righteous. But its tortured combination of evangelical trembling, libertarian posing, and Catholic guilt spoke directly to the deeply contradictory moment of the mid-1990s. American political culture was adapting to both a Democratic presidency and a post-Soviet world. The clear lines of power, politics, and resistance that structured both domestic and international politics during the Cold War were breaking

down. The triangulating policies of the Clinton years confounded the old oppositions of Reaganite conservatism and social democratic leftism. The growing visibility (if not electoral success) of libertarian and green politics during the period exposed a restless desire for a new oppositional politics to resist neoliberal centrism. Libertarianism in particular expressed the desire to “return to” nostalgically imagined conservative principles without “going backwards” to the actual state policy of the 1980s. In the world of superhero comics, there was a similar desire to return without going back. Fans and creators alike were growing weary after a decade of grim-and-gritty antiheroism. The critical, deconstructive energy that infused *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight Returns*—exciting and liberatory in the mid-1980s—had dissipated into nihilism and hypermasculine excess. There was a growing nostalgia for the moral heroism of the “good old days”—though not for the creative constraints of the Comics Code, which had made that morality mandatory. Once again, then, there was a cry for comics to “grow up,” and this time that meant turning away from violent adolescent rebellion back towards some more clearly defined “mature” ethical structure.

In this sociopolitical context, *Kingdom Come*'s awkwardly didactic combination of superhero soap opera, pulpit pounding, and public policy makes sense. Like *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight Returns*, *Kingdom Come* is an out-of-continuity narrative published in a prestige format, and like those books, it used these markers of non-canonical status to position itself as an artistic and political “statement,” claiming a “seriousness” that would magnify its influence within subsequent canon characterizations and events. Alex Ross's Norman Rockwell-esque art in particular lends the narrative a nostalgic, monumental feel

that matched the contemporary yearning uncertainty. The book was a critical and commercial success, influencing the direction of the DC universe in the wake of yet another continuity-resetting “crisis,” the *Zero Hour* event of 1994.

The details of *Kingdom Come*'s hectic plot are not particularly important.²⁷ In broad strokes, its near-future world is overrun by the kind of hyperviolent anti-heroes that flourished in the early 1990s. Superman and Wonder Woman come out of retirement, reform the Justice League, and set out to subjugate, incarcerate, or if necessary kill off this unruly new generation. Batman and Lex Luthor must team up to save humanity from the Justice League's morally confused totalitarian agenda. An apocalyptic conflict ensues.

What is relevant to our discussion here is how the book re-structures Batman's relationship to the rest of the JLA, and the way that new structure forcefully contrasts Batman's cognitive heroism with the physical violence employed by the rest of the team. Unlike in *Batman and the Outsiders* and *Justice League*, which dramatized Batman's incompatibility with cosmopolitics by showing his struggle to lead a superteam, in *Kingdom Come* the Dark Knight spends much of the narrative allied with DC's most famous villains, and even after he double-crosses them, his allegiance to traditional forms of superheroic morality is questionable. Rather than strictly opposing cosmopolitical ethics, *Kingdom Come* places Batman's power management in an ethically grey field existing outside them. In this deeply political and unctuously moral book, the

²⁷ For a more sympathetic—but still nuanced and rigorous—reading of *Kingdom Come*'s plot and its intervention in debates about the direction of the industry in the 1990s, see A. David Lewis's excellent article “Kingdom Code.”

technocratic tools of power management are portrayed as both *apolitical* and morally *neutral*. As Althusser reminds us, sanding off such ideological markers is itself the work of ideology.

This new ethical relationship between neoliberal power management and cosmopolitical heroism is facilitated by another key aspect of *Kingdom Come*'s portrayal of Batman: for the first time, Batman's speculative labor is articulated *exclusively* within the framework of finance ontology, which holds that the operations of money capital can be exported to optimally structure all human relationships and endeavors. In *Kingdom Come* Batman's actions follow the logic of finance. He intervenes in the events of the narrative exclusively through the cognitive labor of speculative prediction, strategic investment and asset management.

This primacy of finance ontology structures the book's representation of the character at the most basic level: in *Kingdom Come*, Bruce Wayne has subsumed the Batman identity, rather than the reverse. Wayne becomes a fully financialized power manager in his own right, who incorporates both the military and the financial aspects of neoliberal power without the displacement, doubling, or disavowal of *Batman and the Outsiders* and *Justice League*. While Wayne's cognitive labor is initially depicted through images of panoptic surveillance and reaction, his speculative heroism becomes increasingly preemptive in the course of the narrative, taking on a distinctly financialized derivative form by the end. This shift is emphasized by the changing spatial context in which Batman performs his "heroic" labor. In the course of the narrative, he moves out of

the Batcave, and does most of his heroic labor in the sunny boardroom from which Lex Luthor manages his villainous corporate empire.

The first time Wayne appears in *Kingdom Come*, he is shown at the Batcomputer, monitoring the situation in Gotham over a bank of monitors, and using that information to precisely direct the deployment of robotic Bat-soldiers (72). Thus, we are introduced to him operating in precisely the style of heroism and leadership that *Batman and the Outsiders* and *Justice League* critiqued and ultimately or rejected. This is heroism extrapolated from the technowar fantasies of the Revolution in Military affairs, in which commanders achieve their goals by leveraging their “force assets” in response to systemic information gained “in real time.” In the robotic Bat-soldiers, Wayne finally achieves the subordination over others that Batman desired in the previous texts. Strategic vision seems here to have been shorn of its practical connections to the need for affective manipulation. But it quickly becomes clear that this RMA-style system of localized surveillance and policing—recognizable to us today as the logic of military occupation—is only one *localized* aspect of Wayne’s efforts to control events. When Superman asks for his aid in reforming the League in an effort to impose a new *global* order by force, Wayne replies that

Control is a delicate matter. It requires finesse, careful planning against those enemies more hidden... Without, I might add, Superman and the Justice League booming into town—punching now, asking questions later... I have my own controls in place, thank you. They may be slower and more methodical than yours, but they get results. (*Kingdom Come* 73-4)

Wayne’s invocation of “finesse,” his insistence that effective change is “delicate” and requires something “slower and more methodical” than righteous recourse to force,

demonstrates the ethical judo with which *Kingdom Come* flips the assumptions of hard body heroism on which so much post-*Watchmen*, post- *The Dark Knight Returns* comic narrative had been based—and it does so precisely by shifting Batman’s position in those narratives. In *Kingdom Come* it is the Justice League led by Superman that embraces the inflexible ideological violence of hard body heroism; it is the League that is animated by the reactionary conviction that “we’re here to force peace! We’re left with no choice! If you stand in the way—I will remove you!” (172).²⁸ By making the League the avatars of anti-democratic extremism, *Kingdom Come* is able to recast Batman’s neoliberal techniques of power management as a form of ideologically neutral “smart power,” one that offers the only alternative to the League’s ham-handed, fascist approach to “delicate” matters of social order.

Wayne’s occupational force of networked robot soldiers is sufficient to control the petty criminals of Gotham, but “delicate” matters involving the production and distribution of social power take place in other spaces, and Wayne has other, more clearly financialized techniques for maximizing his control over these “real” structures of privilege and power. The space of this “real” is the corporate board room. Many of the most pivotal scenes in the book take place within the airy, sun-lit precincts of the LexCorp headquarters (80-3, 107, 139-41).

²⁸ Despite the fact that it is Superman who defines the League’s new totalitarian mission, it is Wonder Woman who comes embodies the fascist spirit in *Kingdom Come*, and so these are her words. The gendered language of Batman’s response echoes of conservative complaints about the “strident” feminism of so-called feminazis, revealing the socially conservative roots of *Kingdom Come*’s objection to over-zealous social policing: “‘Force peace.’ The Amazon tenet... I’ve heard rumors that the Amazons relieved you of your duties and heritage for not being strident enough... face the truth, Diana, you won’t win back [Amazon approval] by over-compensating” (171).

The clear implication of this shift in labor and in laboring context is the forceful reproduction of neoliberal business ontology: the most consequential struggles are essentially corporate in nature, and so the most effective strategies are those legible to and operable within the capitalist system of corporate competition. Once defined as a creature of the night, here Batman's savviest, most devastating maneuver is not a physical attack launched from the shadows, but the haloed, sunlit handshake he shares with Luthor when they merge their efforts to check the Justice League's plans for indiscriminate mass-incarceration (107).

Of course, neither party in this agreement trusts the other. Even as they merge their resources, each knows their alliance will last only as long as it is mutually beneficial. Each plans to betray the other, when the time is right. Each gambles that his own "right time" will come first. One of the most perverse aspects of *Kingdom Come* is the way it makes Batman and Luthor's competitive relationship both less threatening and more productive than the cosmopolitical relations that bind the Justice League together and animate its purpose. The iconic image of the League meeting around a round table to decide its next move is repurposed as a portent of doom, framed in one panel by an ominous passage from the Book of Revelations (88).

In a context in which the League's traditional unity of purpose is figured as harbinger of the apocalypse, Batman and Luthor's competitive antagonism is a perverse source of legitimacy, the foundation of their freedom of action and ability to make real change. Only in the context of the competition between these two masters of capital can the world actually be saved. Here, *Kingdom Come* dramatizes the naturalization of

competition within neoliberalism that Martin, Fisher, and Brown argue is central to neoliberal ideology. As Brown argues, when market competition replaces exchange as the general social and political principle within capitalist realism, “some will triumph and some will die *as a matter of* social and political principle” (*Undoing 65*, my emphasis). Truly, in the choice between capitalist competition and Armageddon, there is no alternative.

In *Kingdom Come* cosmopolitical ideals of egalitarian decision making and affective solidarity are re-articulated as de-individualizing and dangerously emotional, leading towards totalizing ideology and totalitarian impositions of power. Having discredited the radical possibilities the JLA once offered, *Kingdom Come* insists “responsible,” “serious” heroism is drawn instead from the business friendly values of libertarian individualism: “mature” and impartial reason, pious humility, and masculine self-possession—all of which are ultimately linked to Batman’s neoliberal techniques of “delicate” intervention through strategic manipulation and smart investment.

This capitalist realist struggle between Batman and Luthor exemplifies a specifically finance ontology, rather than a more general business one, because the dynamic of their relationship follows the logic of the derivative gamble. Because the mostly likely endgame of their agreement is one deciding that the conditions are right to betray the other, its temporal structure is similar to derivative contracts like currency swaps. Martin gives an example of how such swaps function:

Let us say that a furniture manufacturer in Oregon gets and order for five hundred tables from a Japanese distributor. When the order is placed, it is costed at \$500,000, and priced at an equivalent amount of yen according to the exchange rates then in effect. The manufacturer calculates costs and revenues based upon what the exchange rate between

dollars and yen is at the time of sale. But the tables will take six months to complete, and the exchange rate can change in that time. If the yen declines against the dollar, the manufacturer stands to lose money. To protect against the possibility, the manufacturer takes out a derivative contract to exchange dollars for yen on a certain date at a specific price. Once drafted, this contract has a certain price, and it can itself enter into exchange as a tradable commodity... whose value is derived from the [table deal] but comes to have an economic existence of its own. (*Indifference* 11)

While clear, this is a relatively simple example. In *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk*, Edward and LiPuma and Benjamin Lee argue that in modern global economy, it is not uncommon for international deals to involve exchange values many currencies at once. They give an example of a deal that involves dollars, Euros, pesos, yen, and South African rand. Rather than creating a simple swap contract like the one Martin described, such multi-currency deals are often secured through the creation of complex one-off instrument whose value is derived from the combined volatility of all the currency relations involved (38-41).

The alliance between Wayne and Luthor follows the volatile logic of such complex multi-currency contracts. Formally, they agree to work together until they successfully “curtail the Justice League”—an indeterminate end point, but still a clearly defined one. However, each has the *option* of betraying the other at any point before the stated goal is accomplished, if changing circumstances make that betrayal more profitable than completing the contract.²⁹ However, neither knows exactly under what conditions in the “market” of power the other would exercise that option, though both can speculate

²⁹ Technically, the possibility that one party will renege on the terms of a financial instrument is called the “counterparty risk,” and the likelihood of that risk is itself priced out and included in the calculations that structure the instrument. However, in the larger metaphorical logic of derivative risk and entrepreneurial action in *Kingdom Come*, such betrayal is the principle value of the calculation. See LiPuma and Lee 33-47, 54-56.

about the others motives, and “price” those speculative risks into their own valuation of the deal. Despite the speculative valuations Wayne and Luthor expect from their partnership, its ultimate value to both is only determined at the moment the option of betrayal is ultimately exercised.

It is Wayne who exercises the “option,” and as he does so, the panel layout uses shifting Dutch angles to dramatize how Wayne’s stratagem shifts the balance of power between them (140-1).³⁰ Despite the fact that betrayal was always on the table, Luthor seems shocked that Wayne exercised the option first. Some of this surprise, which the reader might share, comes from the assumption betrayal is inherently unethical; Wayne would hesitate enough for Luthor to do it first. Repudiating this assumption is the first of the many layers of meaning in Wayne’s reply that “I learned from you.” He not only means “I learned to embrace ruthless competition,” but “I learned from your example that networked, financialized agency is a source of power equal to the athletic individualism of traditional heroism—in fact, it reveals limitations in that heroism that can be profitably exploited.” In *Batman and the Outsiders* and *Justice League*, Batman opposed his financialized double. Here, he learns from and surpasses the double, embracing rather than purging finance’s influence.

More immediately, Wayne also means “I learned a piece of strategically valuable information from this interaction with you.” As he turns the tables on Luthor, Wayne reveals that information is the “value” that he actually hoped to gain from his

³⁰ “Dutch angles” are a framing technique in film cinematography that is also used extensively in comic panel design, in which the perspective is framed so that the “shot” is rotated relative to the vertical and horizontal lines within the image. Often used to portray unease or tension.

“investment” in Luthor’s venture. Wayne’s primary interest was not in the stated purpose of the partnership (working together to stymie the Justice League), or even in staging a Max Lord-style takeover of Luthor’s operation in order to stop the League himself. Instead Wayne seeks to complete his totalizing strategic vision of “the entire global conflict.” Wayne times his exercise of the “option” of betrayal to cause maximum damage to Luthor’s organization, but the real return on Wayne’s speculative gambit is the confirmation of his “pricing” of the rest of his positions within the whole strategic environment. Choosing to strike at this moment, Wayne acts preemptively to defend his network of speculative positions by containing a source of future uncertainty. The ultimate goal is not to stabilize the world by reducing chaos and preventing crises crisis, but to intervene at key points and so ensure a dominant position amidst the rubble.

Alex Ross’s artwork consistently uses lighting to put halo effects over Wayne speculative practices. In a text steeped in Christian iconography, this is a clear signal not only that Wayne’s “finesse” in managing social crisis is “smarter” and more effective than the Justice League’s reliance on brute carceral power, but that Wayne’s risk management is also *morally* superior to the League’s desire for total solutions. This is a key moral lesson of neoliberalism: a realistic, “mature” authority accepts the inevitability of crisis, and so seeks not to prevent destructive events by enforcing an “artificial” equilibrium (as in Keynesian economics policy and Cold War containment), but rather uses its powers to manage the timing and impact of the crisis in order to profit both from the disruption itself *and* the reconstruction that follows.

Yet while *Kingdom Come* valorizes Wayne's financialized methodology, his attempt at preemptive risk management does not quite work out as planned. Rather than removing "wild card" Captain Marvel from the board entirely, Wayne's gambit merely releases him from Luthor's control. Despite all the "finesse and careful planning" by Wayne and Luthor, and the totalitarian efforts of the League, the conclusion of *Kingdom Come* ultimately hinges on the individual choices of this "wild card." On its face, this might seem counteract the systemic, financialized style of power embodied by Wayne: Captain Marvel's individual moral agency *could* represent a radical uncertainty that exposes the ways risk management discourse exaggerates finance capital's ability to envision and capture the future. Instead, *Kingdom Come's* conclusion doubles down on neoliberal ideology by fetishizing individual, moral choice in the face of the text's own attention to the overdetermination of such choice in the course of the narrative. It is in this contradiction that the book's investments in neoliberal economics, libertarian politics, and "prosperity gospel"-style religious morality come together in an uneasy fusion that spoke so insistently to readers in the 1990s.

Even as neoliberalism normalizes competition and inequality, Brown, Fisher, Martin, and Sennett all emphasize that neoliberalism still valorizes individual choice, because such choices are what build markets—unequal and unjust as those markets are. The fact that Wayne and Luthor's competitive struggle to corner the market on choice—to monopolize agency and so define the future—actually *frees* the "wild card" to make his own moral choice himself is a neoliberal parable for Smith's invisible hand: from winner-take-all capitalist struggle, freedom trickles down. Even though neoliberalism

insists that “some will triumph and some will die *as a matter of* social and political principle”, within the regime of responsabilization the one who loses must be at fault (*Undoing* 65, my emphasis). As Sennett argues, “most people who enter winner-take-all markets know the likelihood of failure, but ... not to gamble is to accept oneself in advance as a failure.... to do nothing seems passive rather than prudent” (*Corrosion* 90). For this aspect of capitalist realism to function, the sense of individual responsibility and accountability must be preserved, despite the complexity of global networks of power, despite the weight of history, despite everything.

The characters bearing witness to *Kingdom Come*'s final struggle make this clear. The Specter, divine spirit of Justice, intones that the moment of “judgement has come... our entire journey has brought us to this moment.... But who shall be held accountable? Whose sin is this?” Despite aged priest and reader stand-in Norman McCay's insistence that “there is no ‘evil’ here! There is tragedy and there is bedlam” (180-1), a choice must be made, regardless. Blame must be laid. Freed by Wayne's stratagems, Captain Marvel is able to step up and “decide the world”—or at least, he will make the choices that make the market, and the market will decide.

The framing of Marvel's choice is another example of the ideological judo with which *Kingdom Come* flips the traditional moral scripts of superheroism, twisting them to fit new neoliberal norms. The “judgement” Marvel is tasked to make is how to resolve the seemingly irreconcilable tensions between human and superhuman forms of agency set up in the narrative. This is presented as a totalizing choice between binary final solutions: extinction for humans or for superhumans. Either way, not only would one

population face death, but so too would the social relation between the populations. The internal contradictions in that relation would finally lead to its demise. This framing, then, furthers the critique of totalizing, “totalitarian” power established earlier in the opposition between Wayne and the Justice League, *and* implicitly links that opposition to an anxiety about systemic sustainability uncannily similar to Marxist critiques of Capitalism. The challenge to the diegetic population of superheroes stands in for extradiegetic anxieties about the viability of both the superhero narrative form *and* the viability of late capitalism “at the end of history.”

It is in this fraught ideological context that we must interpret both *Kingdom Come*'s valorization of both Marvel's ability to choose, and the choice he actually makes. In the words of a chastened Superman, “He made the only choice that ever truly matters. He chose life” (195). Defying the totalizing binary logic of extinction, Captain Marvel chooses to sacrifice his own life to ensure the partial survival of both populations. The surface irony is obvious: the figure set free to choose by the selfish competition of others is valorized for choosing self-sacrifice himself. The heroic exception is held to prove the dispiriting rule. At a deeper level, though, Marvel's martyrdom sacralizes neoliberalism's embrace of the “creative destruction” at the heart of capitalism. Most of the superhumans are killed along with Marvel, but not enough to pose a systemic threat—at least not right away. Yet, as Wayne points out, the remaining population is “enough to leave us with the same problems as before. The same impasse. The same dangers... the same everything” (194). Marvel chose “life,” then, for the system as well as the people. While resting the outcome on Marvel's individual choice undercuts finance capital's claim to effectively

manage *systemic risk*, the survivability of the *system itself* is ultimately affirmed.

Managing the future is only profitable if there is a future to manage.

This ultimate limit to capital is admitted, then, but only in the moment of its deferral. Marvel refuses to resolve the contradictions of the system, and instead his choice defers the crisis by allowing the destruction of the most bothersome elements. Most of the survivors are old guard Gold and Silver age heroes, and the few members of the violent “new” generation who remain promptly fall into line. *Kingdom Come’s* apocalypse, then, does not end an old world and usher in a new one. Instead, it satisfies the conservative desire to return without going back, through a spectacle of *nostalgic* destruction: it clears away the new in order to make room for the regrowth of the old.

For the diegetic public—and by implication, the DC readership—the events of *Kingdom Come* purge the excesses of Dark Age hard body hypermasculinity, and promise a nostalgic return to the ethical clarity of Silver age cosmopolitics. The ostensible guarantor of this mythical return is Superman’s super-morality, which was tested in the conflict and renewed through his witness of Marvel’s martyrdom. Yet there are two powerful reasons to doubt the conclusion’s jubilant faith in Superman and the renewed, productive moral order he both exemplifies.

First, the conclusion’s structuring logic is that of deferral, not transformation. Marvel’s martyrdom reset the system to an earlier state in which cosmopolitical heroism can thrive, but that system will only drift, with time, back towards the same forms of totalizing crisis—and so towards a repeat of Superman’s own turn towards fascistic behavior in response to such crisis.

Kingdom Come's conclusion demands the willful forgetting of the cyclical nature of crisis and "creative destruction"—both in the relationship between humans and superhumans the *story itself* established, and implicitly in the forms of "crisis" and/or "casino" capitalism that were emerging in the 1990s from the shattered ruins of Cold War certainties. In Superman's final speech to the UN—representatives of human authority and agency—we can recognize today many of the tropes of 1990s millennialism, which triumphantly declared an end to cyclical struggles in economics, politics, technology, etc:

I no longer care about the mistakes of yesterday. I care about coping with tomorrow... together. The problems we face still exist. We're not going to solve them for you... we're going to solve them with you... not by ruling above you... but by living among you. We will no longer impose our power on humanity. We will earn your trust [...] in the hope that your world and our world could be one world once again" (*Kingdom Come* 194-6, original elapses except where marked).

In the face of Wayne's acknowledgement that ultimate crisis was only deferred, Superman insists on the willful fantasy of apocalypse, remaking the crisis as a total break. Ignoring the "mistakes of the past," Superman insists that this time, best intentions will finally win out... if we can trust him just one more time. Like capital, he holds out the promise that this time superheroes have finally learned their limits, and so this round of profitable rebuilding will miraculously avoid all the contradictions that engendered crisis in cycles past.

This leads to the second glaring problem with *Kingdom Come*'s ideological fantasy of renewal. To buy what Superman is selling here, we have to suspend, not only our knowledge of the cyclical nature of the crisis he is promising to resolve, but our memory of Superman's moral and practical failures across the preceding narrative. Why should we trust Superman's moral compass to rebuild the world, when during the crisis

he was forced to admit that “every choice I’ve made so far has brought us here”—to the brink of extinction and annihilation (*KC* 181)? In contrast, it is impossible to forget that in the time of structural crisis, Wayne’s vision was clear, his capabilities were effective. Because the crisis has only been deferred, the implication remains that a financialized, morally flexible security establishment—embodied by the side-switching Batman—is the real guarantor of freedom and justice. Lurking underneath the bad faith of *Kingdom Come*’s triumphant embrace of a new equality and a return to democracy, then, is a backhanded endorsement of undemocratic technocracy. Because Superman’s “mature” ethics are underwritten by Batman’s amoral-but-professional “seriousness,” Superman is ultimately only a figurehead; Batman is the substance, the deep state of neoliberal superheroism.

Despite the vast ensemble cast of the narrative, and the prominence of Superman and Captain Marvel as moral exemplars, Bruce Wayne remains the key to the ideological work *Kingdom Come* performs, and his characterization participates in, and pushes forward, the narrative trajectory of power management. *Kingdom Come* not only foregrounds Batman’s power management, but presents it as a single unified skillset for the first time. Rather than splitting the military and financial aspects of neoliberal speculative practice and opposing them to each other, as previous texts did, *Kingdom Come* combines them into a single performance of power by an equally integrated Batman/Bruce Wayne. While Marvel’s moral choice is fetishized, it is Wayne’s unified speculative practices that made that “free” choice possible, and those capacities ultimately secure the nostalgic future presided over by Superman.

In the larger political context of US politics in the 1990s, *Kingdom Come* frees Wayne's neoliberal, technocratic practices from the association with the Reagan administration that they had in 1980s texts like *Batman and the Outsiders* and *Justice League*, without connecting them clearly to the progressive aspects of Clintonism³¹—rendering the techniques of power management down into apolitical best practices, compatible with any partisan cause. Similarly, in *Kingdom Come* Wayne/Batman achieves a new level of moral and functional independence from all “sides” of the conflict. From this position, he is able to influence both the actions of the Justice League and the ethical foundation of those actions without the need for the kinds of leadership struggles that defined his role in *Batman and the Outsiders* and *Justice League*. He exerts his influence through his results, by showing that his are the best practices. Rather than demanding others take his orders, as he did before, in *Kingdom Come* following his plans is a choice—even if he works to make it the only one. This is part of *Kingdom Come*'s biggest ideological hustle, the false reconciliation of individual choice and morality with the responsabilization of neoliberal life, in which the system both demands that someone loses, *and* that subjects are personally and morally responsible for their success.

Kingdom Come, then, does not explicitly repudiate power management and exorcise it from the narrative, as *Batman and the Outsiders* and *Justice League* did.

³¹ ... or, indeed, to President Clinton himself. While one might object that *Kingdom Come*'s hazy near-future timeline means that Clinton would be out of office during these events, the elseworld futures of both *Watchmen* and *DKR* portrayed recognizable figures extending their stay in the oval office: Nixon and Reagan, respectively. *Kingdom Come*'s decision to represent human civic authority through the nameless bureaucracy of the UN is a striking contrast to the pointed specificity of *Watchmen* and *DKR*, and contributes to the both the depolitization of power management, and the vaguely libertarian tone of the text as a whole.

Instead, the critical function Batman and his neoliberal capacities played in the narrative are strategically misremembered in *Kingdom Come*'s triumphant conclusion. *Kingdom Come* depicts a crisis that only neoliberal rationality could comprehend; a crisis that was not resolved but only deferred. That deferral is what affords the nostalgic return to traditional heroic values and relations. But we are asked, in bad faith, to forget that these traditional practices fomented the crisis so freshly deferred. The conclusion stages the conservative wish that *this time*, the good old values will not lead to the same old contradictions—the crisis can be deferred forever. Batman's power management is represented as necessary in times of crisis, and so it *could be* necessary if and when the crisis looms again. But *Kingdom Come* undercuts this acknowledgement of neoliberal power by insisting, in bad faith, that this time the nostalgic repetition of traditional heroism and traditional values will get it *right*. This time the crisis the deferred crisis will be deferred *indefinitely*. Batman—and the neoliberal power he represents—are indeed an integral part of the social order *Kingdom Come* posits, but somehow he will remain in the shadows, and we will stay with Superman in the light.

By offering this magical resolution to irreconcilable tensions between neoliberal markets and liberal values, *Kingdom Come* moves beyond the opposition dynamic that structured *Batman and the Outsiders* and *Justice League*, instead staging complicated ethical *compromises* between neoliberal modes of power and cosmopolitical ideals—even as those compromises are elided in the bad faith of its wishful conclusion. *Kingdom Come* articulates neoliberal superheroism's connections to the libertarian forms of conservatism that cohered in the 1990s, figuring power management as a morally dubious

gateway through which a still distinct traditional heroism might return. In *JLA*, for the first time, power management would no longer threaten traditional superheroism, or offer a counterpoint to it, but rather redefine that heroism at its core, becoming the model for thinking all power—including not only the exceptional agency of superheroes but the new imperial forms of state and corporate power—under a single rubric. *JLA* stages power management's becoming-hegemonic as the aspirational mode of the imperial imagination.

Chapter 3
**Managing Superpowers: Popular Fantasies for a Neoliberal Present, Part 2:
Batman as the Normative Ideal of Neoliberal Governance 1997-2001**

The Batman that appeared in the late 1990s incarnations of the Justice League is often identified by comics fans as “the coolest,” “the most badass,” and “the most definitive” version of the character.¹ While Batman has always been a popular character, in the high imperial moment at the turn of the millennium, he became something more. This version of Batman incarnates the logic of power management at the peak of its cultural dominance, and for the first time he became popular *as a power manager*. Where *Batman and the Outsiders* and *Justice League* both ultimately exorcise power management after grappling with its implications, in Grant Morrison and Waid Porter’s *JLA* “New World Order” (1997), power management is finally affirmed as not only compatible with, but as the *essence of and foundation for* superheroic ethics and agency at the turn of the millennium. As was the case in the texts examined in Chapter Two, both the characteristic techniques and the guiding ethos of neoliberal power throw traditional cosmopolitical heroism into crisis, but rather than rejecting and expelling the power manager to preserve cosmopolitics, in *JLA* it is traditional heroism that must either justify itself or adapt to the new neoliberal norms in order to survive.

¹ A scholarly example is critic Nicholas Galante’s pronouncement that “nowhere is the capability of the World’s Greatest Detective more apparent than in Morrison’s 1990s run of *JLA*” (“Our Father” 173). For a representative example of fan discourse on the period, see Tom Pinchuck’s *Comic Vine* article and the discussion that follows, particularly commenters Remixxx and FadeToBlack.

3.1 Defining a “New World Order” of Power Management in *JLA* (1997-2001)

Following the critical and commercial success of *Kingdom Come*, DC felt the time was right to revamp its Justice League titles by relaunching the series in a new book that would showcase the original line-up of iconic heroes. *Kingdom Come*'s sales figures convinced DC's editors that the time of the gritty, “realistic” hero was finally over. The new title, *JLA*, would be unapologetically fantastic, a self-conscious return to the kind of grand cosmic adventure that defined the league in the 60s and 70s. Series editor Ruben Diaz promises as much in his introductory remarks in issue #1:

JLA will strive to bring nostalgic excitement to everyone [...] we're looking to give you fans a title filled with all the things that hooked you onto comics in the first place [...] what you've stuck around and mailed letters for [...] icons banded together for truth, justice, and the American Way.

There was every reason, then, to expect that *JLA* would fit smoothly into the nostalgic, conservative logic of *Kingdom Come*'s conclusion: the good old heroes would play out the good old stories readers remembered from the good old days. Expectation for this kind of thematic and political continuity was strengthened when *Kingdom Come* writer Mark Waid was chosen to co-write the three issue “prequel” miniseries *Justice League: Midsummer's Nightmare*, which officially ends the beleaguered *Justice League International* and reunites of the original team, clearing the ground for *JLA*.

Many critics see *JLA* as an extension of the conservative political impulses that structured *Kingdom Come*. Geoff Klock argues that while *JLA* succeeds in breaking out of *Kingdom Come*'s backward-looking nostalgia at a formal, stylistic level, the narrative remains politically conservative because the team defends the status quo rather than uses its global power proactively for radical progressive ends (Klock 122-134, 137-144). Most

scholars and fans, though, read *JLA* as a break from both the “gritty” revisionism of *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* and the conservative nostalgia of *Kingdom Come*. Responding to Klock, Marc Singer argues that “despite its cast of tightly controlled corporate properties and its position at the center of the DC Comics continuity, *JLA* attempts to revitalize the superhero genre by aligning it with egalitarian rather than authoritarian politics and perusing novelty rather than nostalgia” (*Combining* 150). The writer of the new series, Scotsman Grant Morrison, built his reputation writing for DC’s Vertigo line, and was known for formal experimentation, hip occultism and sexy anarchism.² Further, being a non-American gave him a certain critical distance from the Justice League’s ideals of “truth, justice, and the American way.”³

² Morrison’s signature mix of hip hedonism, literary occultism, and rebellious individualism *seems* opposed to the logics of state and corporate power that animate power management, but looking back on his 90s work today we can see how it often strays into what Murray Bookchin called “lifestyle anarchism” (*Social Anarchism* 19-28). While *Doom Patrol* and *The Invisibles* offer many powerful moments of spiritual and political insurrection, they are also replete with the kind of depoliticized, consumerist hedonism Bookchin castigates in Bey’s *T.A.Z.* Like Bey, Morrison’s 1990s work is often “more oriented towards achieving one’s own ‘self-actualization’ than basic social change [...] this view will not repel the boutiques of capitalist ‘culture’ any more than long hair, beards, and jeans have repelled the entrepreneurial world of haute fashion [...] withdrawal into individualist ‘autonomy’, Foucauldian ‘limit experiences,’ and neo-Situationist ‘ecstasy’ threatens to render the very word *anarchism* politically and socially harmless—a mere fad for the titillation of petite bourgeois of all ages” (Bookchin 19-22). As Bookchin points out, this style of hedonic rebellion is easily assimilated within neoliberal virtues of responsabilization and human capital management. Indeed, one could argue they simply put a heroic, rebellious gloss on the same behaviors Mark Fisher diagnoses in the “hedonic lassitude” of reflexive impotence (*Capitalist Realism* 21-23).

³ As Chris Murray argues, for UK writers like Morrison, the superhero was an inherently “problematic figure,” because “the appropriation of superheroes as a form of American mythology [by UK writers] did not come from an ideological connection to [American] values, but instead stemmed from... having been raised in a country partially colonized by American popular culture and used as an outpost from American military might [...] This perspective [...] gave them a cynical attitude towards America and what American power (cultural, political, and military) represented” (“Airship One” 43). Yet when taking on a mainstream flagship title like *JLA*, Morrison was clearly writing in an American discourse, and to and for a largely American readership.

I agree with critics like Singer that in *JLA*, Morrison *attempts* to deploy the popular fantasy of superheroism in order to map possibilities for an emancipatory politics amidst the transition from Reagan's Cold War neoliberalism to the politics of Empire under Clinton and Blair. Rather than seeking to return without going back, in the nostalgic mode of *Kingdom Come*, in *JLA* Morrison attempts to renegotiate the terms of cosmopolitical heroism, looking forward into the new millennium. In so doing, however, he translates the cosmopolitan vision of democratic equality embedded in the *JLA* mythology even more firmly into the neoliberal language of competitive individualism.

Morrison's work in *JLA* illustrates the point scholars of neoliberalism have reminded us of so many times: critiquing the rigidity of authoritarianism and the centralized power of the Cold War world-system the US built with the Marshall Plan, Bretton Woods, and the Bomb is hardly incompatible with the logic of capital. Of course, Morrison is not the only leftist to inadvertently carry water for emergent neoliberalism, "wrong-footed by Capital's mobilization and metabolization of the desire for emancipation from Fordist routine" and from the obsolete political geometries of Cold War politics (Fisher 34). The celebration of individual freedom, flexible hierarchies, and the thrill of novelty inform the character of the late capitalist "Davos Man" as much as they do the insurrectionary chaos magicians of Morrison's oeuvre (Sennett 60-63). As Fisher notes, "'flexibility,' 'nomadism,' and 'spontaneity' are the very hallmarks of management in post-Fordist society" (28). Further, Brown argues that much of Foucault's critical engagement is haunted by this tension. He was captivated by neoliberalism's

stated goals of “not being governed so much,” even as he theorized the many ways it intensified our subjection to the dictates of the market (*Undoing* 55).

We can see a similar attraction to “not being governed so much” in the neoliberal foundations of Morrison’s strategy for repudiating authoritarian heroism, visible in the language Singer uses to praise that effort: “contrary to his revisionist predecessors [and] his retro peers [in *JLA*] Morrison attempts to write a politically progressive superhero comic by holding humanity responsible for its own fate [...] His comics place the responsibility for social change on the average citizen, not the superhero” (*Combining* 157). On its face, this sounds like a model of just co-operation, giving moral and agential priority to the mortal populace. But Singer’s argument that *JLA* turns “potential conservatism” into “progressive” possibility only works *if* the “average citizen” is indeed capable of self-management and self-development in *JLA*, and if those citizens are able to collectively develop society through the democratic institutions of human government. Just underneath *JLA*’s noble-sounding sentiments lurks the logic of responsabilization and populations at risk which Brown and Martin have argued are at the heart of the neoliberalism’s “soft power” takeover of Northern and Western democracies.

Responsibilization devolves the provision of social goods back onto individuals. Further, individuals are not only held responsible for investing in and effectively managing their own welfare, but new discourses evolve that hold them responsible to the very social order that has abandoned them. While responsabilization is an extension of biopolitical control, under the financializing pressures of neoliberalism, responsabilization functions not to separate the strong from the weak, or the healthy from the sick, but to

separate the risk-capable from the at-risk, the self-managed from the to-be-managed and the unmanageable. As Martin notes, in Clinton's America, increased entrepreneurial freedom for the investor class was accompanied by "a massive flight from commitment" to public welfare and public goods.

[As] an articulation of the state with finance, this initiative of rule amounts to a shift away from citizens and consumers towards investors [...] who manage their affairs and take care of their own future. (*Indifference* 8)

Clinton's triangulated "centrist" welfare and law enforcement reforms throughout the 1990s interlocked with financial deregulation, both sharing the basic logic of "urging an embrace of risk and self-management [on] domestic subjects, then ignoring, incarcerating, or dispossessing those who cannot make the grade" (Martin 14). Those who can comply with the new mandates of self-management and self-development gain even more "freedom" to act as they wish in the shrinking field of public discourse and political action, without interference from the regulatory apparatus—and their increased scope of action is lauded as a proof of a greater "freedom" for all.

I read *JLA* as an attempt to work through this shift in social relations, using the tropes of the superhero genre. In *JLA*, the Justice League can claim to be the defenders of cosmopolitical ideals, democratic government, and individual freedom, while at the same time embracing the antidemocratic toolbox of financialized neoliberal power. Superman's answer to the question "when does intervention become domination?" accomplishes this ideological slight-of-hand by affirming liberal humanist principles, but making access to those principles contingent on the subject's performance of neoliberal self-management. As in regimes of responsabilization, in Superman's ethics individual sovereign freedom is

no longer a right, but rather a mark of distinction, access to which must be continually reestablished. Those who show they can manage themselves are “allowed to climb to [their] own destiny” freely and without interference. The League’s mission is to “catch” those who fail to manage themselves effectively “when they fall” (*JLA* issue 4 page 19) and loss their status as free subjects to hands-on surveillance and management by the League. The heroic agency of the League operates in the void left by the state’s and the market’s “massive flight from commitment,” but their spectacular heroic interventions neither replace nor reform the unjust and crisis-prone status quo. Their heroism merely polices the crises of a bad social order they insist is responsible for reforming itself.

JLA’s opening four issue plot arc, “New World Order,” draws heavily on the themes of *Kingdom Come* to develop this crisis of responsibility. Waid and Ross used the image of an overbearing, out of control Justice League to explore the ethical limits of superheroes’ power to both protect and define mundane human society. In the “New World Order” arc, Morrison also introduces a “bad” League, called the Hyperclan, who incarnate the totalitarian possibilities within the League’s mission of global policing. As in *Kingdom Come*, in *JLA* the League defines its ethical and political commitments by struggling against these sinister doubles. However, “New World Order” also focuses on the institutions of mundane society—the state, the media, and the public—are challenged by this “bad” League. While the Justice League—by adhering to Batman’s neoliberal best practices—ultimately rises to the Hyperclan’s challenge, the state, the media, and the public do not.

In *JLA* American democracy, as practiced in the late 1990s, failed to produce agents able to claim such market-verified sovereignty. We are shown subjects from the civic institutions of the US state, to the collective civic public, to the individual level of citizen *and* individual superhero, who fail the test of responsabilization, and so forfeit their sovereignty as liberal subjects. It is within the resulting space of abdicated and abandoned sovereignty that Batman's neoliberal power management claims and exercises its authority in *JLA*. Batman incarnates a neoliberal order that rules absolutely in the name of a liberal freedom that is publically celebrated—with the implicit understanding that but that the public can no longer be *trusted* with that freedom.

In *JLA* power management completes its process of becoming-hegemonic in the DC universe's popular fantasy of power. *Batman and the Outsiders* and *Justice League International*, still thinking its emergence, figured power management as a threat to both human freedom and cosmopolitical heroism, a powerful but disruptive force that was ultimately expelled from both narratives. A decade later, *Kingdom Come* figured power management as a necessary evil, the dark complement that secures the nostalgic return of traditional values and traditional heroism. *JLA* collapses the division entirely by “revealing” power management as the unacknowledged foundation that “really” grounded superheroism “all along”—and it does so by repeatedly staging this realization by characters *within* the narrative. A consistent theme in *JLA*, from the first issue forward, is that, with the exception of Batman, the superheroes of the League are unable to live up to the responsibility of self-management, and thus they, too, are subject to intervention by Batman's virtuous agency “when they fall.” Further, throughout “New

World Order,” League members face situations in which they realize that they must internalize and perform Batman’s power management approach to superheroism in order to deploy their own characteristic abilities effectively—not only their physical capacities, but their intellectual and affective ones as well.

Through its deep investment in the neoliberal logic of responsabilization, Morrison’s *JLA* hollows out the radical democratic ideals of cosmopolitics and replaces them with the neoliberal techniques of power management. From the team’s field of action, to its decision-making processes, to the way the narrative frames knowledge and identity, the solidarity and knowledge-sharing that animated the 1960s Justice League are infiltrated by and subordinated to the work of risk analysis, speculative projection, and asset leveraging. Batman is no longer exceptional, but *exemplary*, setting the “benchmarks” of “Best Practice” against which all others—nations, citizens, and heroes—are judged. Despite being “just a man,” Batman is elevated to become both the model for and the limit of superpowered agency. Thus, in *JLA* the whole enterprise of global heroism is anchored in Batman’s exemplary self-management and personal capital development, cementing not only the triumph of cognitive, immaterial labor not only over both productive capital and physical force in the cultural fantasy of millennial capitalism, but also the triumph of neoliberal governance over a “fallen” democratic order.

3.2.1 The Rapid Fall of the Democratic State

The first domino to fall in *JLA*’s chain of abdications is the democratic state. It takes only four pages for Morrison and Porter to eviscerate the state’s claim on political

and moral legitimacy. *JLA* can set up so much political context in so little space because its critique of state power references and remixes elements of contemporary cultural and popular discourses of the 1990s, which widely held—if not always lamented—that US state power and world leadership were no longer maintained as material realities so much as virtual spectacles, carefully cultivated media images.⁴ Many scholars since have productively explored the shift towards simulacral politics in the 1990s, but for our analysis of how media culture is deployed to delegitimize the state in *JLA*, I want to focus on how it shifts attention from the state as a privileged *site* of deliberation and political authority, to seeing the state as *a discreet actor* competing against others *within a marketplace of images and ideas*. Put this way, we can see how approaching the state through the language of “optics” and public relations perpetuates the finance ontology of neoliberal governance, which “reconceives the public realm” as an instrumentalized “domain of strategies, techniques and procedures through which different forces and groups attempt to render their programs operable” (Elizabeth Meehan, qtd in *Undoing* 127). By reducing politics to the politics of appearance, *JLA* anticipates the process by which participatory democracy has been supplanted by consumable spectacle over the last two decades. *JLA* succinctly summarizes this process, depicting a marginalized, self-interested state too concerned with promoting its own brand within the political marketplace to maintain its traditional responsibilities to national defense or public

⁴ Key examples on the theoretical side of this public discourse are Baudrillard’s *The Gulf War did not take place* (1991) and Jameson’s *Postmodernism* (1991). On the popular culture side, political satires like Tim Robbin’s *Bob Roberts* (1992) and Ivan Reitman’s *Dave* (1993) proliferated. Barry Levinson’s black comedy *Wag the Dog* (1997), which focused on the antidemocratic effects of hyper mediated politics, came out a few months after *JLA #1*.

policy. Ponderous and incompetent as a media actor, the State is no match for the sophisticated strategies and techniques the Hyperclan deploy to “render their program operable” in America’s image culture. Ultimately, only Batman is able to effectively counter the Hyperclan’s mediated assault, because like them he adopts and adapts to the finance ontology of neoliberalism.

The first panel of the series is an idyllic image of the Whitehouse. The following four pages establish that the US state of the 1990s is a mere husk of its former self. American power is depicted as radically diminished, only a shadow of the monolithic giant imagined in the Cold War rhetoric of 1960s containment culture, or the grandiose stylings of the Reagan era, within and against which previous versions of the League positioned themselves. In the first panel, the august image of White House is belied by accompanying dialog, which makes it clear that the President must meet with and apologize to the leader of another nation, “*El Presidente*, or whatever it is this jumped-up bandit calls himself” (*JLA*#1, sp 1). The President places blame for the embarrassing incident on “General McAuley [and] his scotch whiskey.... he just came right out and said it.... three little words that almost ended my career.” This snippet of dialog gives the impression of a divided, chaotic government, of power struggles and dissention within the ranks. While this may be an accurate picture of how the US state actually functions, in *JLA* it is highlighted right out of the gate to complicate the state’s claim to represent what Wendy Brown called the *demos*, that collective body that transmutes the individual agency of *homo politicus* into social power through the democratic process. At no point in our brief introduction to US Executive power do the president or his aides speak for

the *demos* or consider the interests or desires of the people as such. The authority of the state as either a coherent agent in world affairs, or as a legitimate vehicle for citizens' interest in those affairs, is undermined from *JLA*'s first panel.

America's influence among other nations is also undermined by this brief bit of dialog. Where the US once showcased its global power through its Executive veto on the leadership of Central and South American nations,⁵ here the President is reduced to massaging the ego of an "El Presidente" who stands in for the region. While the end of the Cold War has left the US as "the world's only superpower," this dialog implies that such power does not translate into respect from other world leaders. Far from gaining greater freedom of action in the post-Cold War period, America finds itself unable to live up to its self-appointed roles as global hegemon and policeman. It is unable to fulfill the responsibilities it has elected for itself—let alone those the citizenry elected it for.

The second panel begins to explain how the US reached this diminished state: as the President discusses the situation with his aides, it is clear that he is totally focused on "optics" and appearances, on maintaining the *image* of power, rather than on material realities that afford the capacity for real social and political agency. A key part of national image maintenance is, in the President's banal wording, showing the other powers of the world "that we have superpeople coming out of our ears" (*JLA* #1, sp 1).⁶ But in *JLA* ties

⁵ Such nations provided easy targets when national military virility needed a boost, for JFK (Cuba), Reagan (Grenada), Bush (Panama), and Clinton (Haiti). More subtle but no less potent demonstrations of US influence were the many coups and insurgencies it orchestrated in the region, and the structural adjustment policies imposed by US-backed international organizations like the World Bank and the IMF.

⁶ Such state management of hero-citizens who "could be commanded to serve in a military capacity," whose superhuman bodies could be "deployed as weapons of war"—is precisely the relation of hero and

between state power and superpower are flimsy at best. The President's official "superhuman escort" is a no-show for the event with "El Presidente," and an aide's halting explanation shows the tenuousness of the government's knowledge of and power over its super-agents. "Firehawk? He... ah... pulled out, Mr. President, Sir. He, she, I don't have a *clue* who Firehawk is. Anyway, he got sick, lost his powers. I don't know" (*JLA* #1, sp 1, ellipses and italics in orig).⁷ Despite the US government's desire to maintain an impression that American super-citizens are an extension of American state power, then, in *JLA* the State compels nothing and is forced to take what it can get.

The impotence of US state power is underscored when a real threat arrives, in the form of a giant UFO hovering above the Whitehouse, depicted in a dramatic "splash page" that takes up all of page two. The obvious intertext here is Roland Emmerich's 1996 blockbuster *Independence Day*. In fact, the inner cover of *JLA* #1 features a full page ad for the film that is strikingly similar to Porter's art here.⁸ Coincidence or not, in

state that the 1960s Justice League worked to subvert through its articulation of global citizenship (Fawaz 56), and that *Batman and the Outsiders* confronted in the Force of July.

⁷ Not only is the government unable to compel this Firehawk's participation in its official activities, they don't have the most basic information about this hero is, what their exact powers are, or even why they are "pulling out" of their assigned role. Further, it is clear they don't have any back-up heroes to fill in. The hollowness of this cape-rattling is emphasized by the fact that while Firehawk is a hero within the DCU, she (it is a she) is a very minor character, of marginal popularity among DC fans and thus of marginal power and influence within the diegetic universe. Most readers, even those well versed in DC lore, would likely know as little about this D-list hero as the aide did. One of the first fan letters printed in the series is from a Firehawk fan, but the writer's language proves my point here. Terry Morrow writes that "I have to admit that the reference to Firehawk losing her powers on page 1 didn't sit well with me. She's one of my favorite DC heroines (who, apparently, no one else cares for). I'm willing to think the reference was being made about either Firestorm or Fire (both of whom are [former] JLA members) by an aide who doesn't know the difference" (*JLA* #4).

⁸ Morrison has insisted that he wrote the issue—and planned the layout with Porter—before seeing any of the *Independence Day* promotional materials, including the image that shipped in *JLA* #1, and that they didn't know in advance that the ad would appear in the issue. While there *may* be *some* truth to this, it is

JLA this image taps into widespread anxiety about the precarity of US state power at the “end of history.” Both images expose a crisis point in mid-1990s popular culture’s depiction of the shift from Cold War superpower politics to the new transnational forms of domination associated with neoliberal empire, which were imbricated with, but not responsible to, America’s economic and military “national interests.”

In *Independence Day*, Earth’s invasion by strip-mining alien capitalists provides a revitalizing crisis for America. Driven from the traditional sites of geographical power (the White House, Manhattan, Los Angeles), forced back into contact with “the people,” America’s elite are shocked out of their peacetime decadence, and forced to take up their rightful place as “leaders of the free world,” uniting the world in a new *Bellum Americanum*. With attack and invasion comes clarity and purpose, a vitalizing shot of testosterone to counteract the aimlessness and nostalgic soul-searching that occupied so much of masculine popular culture in the early 90s.⁹ In *Independence Day*’s nationalist fantasy, America is not only able to lead, it *needs* to lead. Like American masculinity, American political leadership works best in the warrior mode, when there is a clear antagonist to define itself against.¹⁰ *Independence Day*’s ludicrously gung-ho finale, in which the US leads the world in a coalition of retribution into righteous race-war with the

hard to believe that either managed to evade the film or 20th Century Fox’s extensive promotional blitz, which was anchored by the iconic image of the White House being destroyed by a UFO’s beam of light.

⁹ See Jeffords and Pfeil on the “New men” in 1990s films like *Kindergarten Cop*, *City Slickers*, and *Hook*.

¹⁰ Canadian fan D. Todd Sikorsky’s complaint that in the 90s incarnations of the League “more time was spent on the heroes bickering, pouting, and goofing off instead of having them confront legitimate threats” echoes hawkish critiques of the use of US state power during the H.W. Bush/Clinton era (*JLA* #3 letter column).

Other, is a classic case of ideological misremembering, a fantastical return to the Cold War “balance of power” in which the “El Presidentes” of the developing world accepted US hegemony in exchange for protection, bribery, or both. *Independence Day* offered the glorious fantasy that the US could play both underdog *and* hegemon; that faced with the right enemy, America’s wartime leadership could so colonize the world’s imagination that henceforth July 4th would be celebrated worldwide to mark a renewal of America’s benevolent dominion—a new global dependence day.

If *Independence Day* stages alien invasion to figure America as a sleeping giant waiting for the right challenge to rise to, in *JLA* the same setup reveals America as a paper tiger, its power a PR mirage that crumbles at the first real challenge.¹¹ The President’s reaction to the alien craft is the monosyllable “AH,” its noticeably smaller font reflecting his own diminished ability to respond to real crisis. Clearly overwhelmed, the President immediately implores of his staff “will somebody call the Justice League?” (*JLA* #1, sp 3). He does not deploy the League as a resource of US military power, nor does he request the League’s intercession as a reasoned act of policy. He begs for their help from a place of helplessness and terror.

When Superman takes over the situation, then, he enters a space of power and responsibility that was not delegated to him so much as it was abandoned. By deferring responsibility for first contact to Superman and the Justice League, the president has

¹¹ While I think Morrison and Porter chose this intertext mostly for topical impact, the key reason for the invasions different effects is that in Emmerich’s film the physical threat of the alien invasion allows the US to “escape” from image relations and reassert its virility in “real” conflict. In *JLA*, the physical threat is just a feint. The Hyperclan’s challenge to earthly authority remains explicitly within the field of spectacle and ideology.

abdicated his role as “leader of the free world,” and so his right to don his “Sunday suit” and speak for humanity.¹²

The subtext of this carefully structured introductory sequence is that the Justice League is operating in a gap of leadership and competence created by limitations in human society, but they do so in a way that upholds the structure of that society *in principle*. Superman intervenes in this vital scene of species encounter as a representative of Earth, but he does so only because Earth’s elected representatives have abdicated that responsibility. This allows Morrison and Porter to situate Superman, and by extension the JLA, as morally and politically independent of the US state, even though their ideals align them with traditional American values and interests. They can champion “Truth, Justice, and the American Way” without deference to the US state, because the state can no longer claim that it actively represents those values itself. The League steps in to catch the “fallen” democratic state. The League *would* defer to a competent, active, honorable state authority, but within contemporary media society, such an authority *no longer exists*.

¹² Attention to this scene's construction of a space of emergency that has been evacuated of state power, creating a sovereign vacuum Superman and the Justice League must fill, helps us understand Morrison and Porter's choice to portray the US President as an anonymous figure, whose perpetually-shadowed face reduces him to the barest minimum needed to perform “being presidential”—a fitted suit and a strong chin. Whatever he is, though, he is *not* recognizable as William Jefferson Clinton. Rather than caricaturing the sitting president as a tyrant, a maniac, or a buffoon, as 1980s texts *Watchman*, *DKR*, and *Justice League* did, respectively, *JLA*'s satire targets the office rather than the officeholder. Like the US state, the President is reduced to a hollow simulacrum, an image of power devoid of substance regardless of whose body happens to be filling out the suit at a given moment.

3.2.2 Interpassivity, Authoritarianism, and the “Fallen” Citizen-Consumer

When Superman took over the situation on the Whitehouse Lawn, he assumed the responsibility to negotiate with the invaders on humanity’s behalf—a responsibility abdicated by our “legitimate” representatives in civil government. However, Superman’s assumed authority is itself usurped almost immediately. As the aliens start to emerge, *JLA* shifts our perspective from the *actual* scene of interaction to an extended montage of *media representations of that interaction*. Superman’s attempt to mediate between humans and the invaders is itself bypassed by the media, but the Fourth Estate fails to speak for us in his place. Instead, it ends up speaking *to us for* the Hyperclan, breathlessly relaying the invaders’ chosen messages. Superman’s attempt to frame the scene as a site of diplomacy and political deliberation is unsuccessful, because the Hyperclan’s framing of a brand rollout is more in tune with the affordances of the media as a marketplace of images and ideology.

In “New World Order” the alien invaders expose the weakness of America’s simulated power, not only through their violation of US territory—their unchallenged landing on the White House lawn—but by their ability to commandeer the very media infrastructure through which America’s cultural hegemony is maintained. The Hyperclan orchestrate their arrival to maximize media attention, establishing their ability to command *both* the material and virtual registers of power. After establishing credible material threat with their looming UFO—and its intertextual link to the mass destruction of *Independence Day*—the Hyperclan switches to a benevolent register upon emerging,

announcing that they've "come to save the world" (*JLA* #1, sp 5).¹³ The next twenty eight panels, spread over six pages, introduce the Hyperclan exclusively through the media's coverage of the group and its activities. The panels either contain television screens, or are presented as screens themselves.¹⁴ The accompanying running exposition takes the form of a newscast transcript. In effect, we are introduced to the Hyperclan *as a media narrative*—and a successful one. Over the course of two days, "these seemingly selfless heroes from beyond the stars" become beloved celebrities. Their leader, Protex, "is named 'the sexiest man in the universe' by readers of the Sunday Planet magazine" (*JLA* #1, sp 20). The success of the narrative is *part* of the narrative, as if the press is surprised at how effortlessly the aliens navigate the media-entertainment system. One reporter marvels that "it may be millennial fever, but the members of the Hyperclan have whipped up the winds of change, which look set to sweep across the entire world...." (*JLA* #1, sp 11, ellipses in orig.) In a highly accelerated version of cultural imperialism, the Hyperclan employ the technology of celebrity spectacle to challenge more traditional forms of social authority—both the political authority of the state, and the ethical authority of superheroes like the Justice League.

¹³ There are shades of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Wise 1951) in this switch from threat to alien judgement, though Klaatu did not offer to relieve humanity of the burden of saving itself, as the Hyperclan does. Like Superman he demanded that humanity must do the work of putting its own house in order.

¹⁴ Layouts that highlight parallels between panel structure and television montages are a recurring theme in American comics. Prominent examples include *Captain America*, *Watchmen*, and *DKR*. This paralleling served a wide variety of purposes in these narratives. In *JLA*, it serves less as a comment on the comic form, than as a narrative device to emphasize both the mediated nature of the public's interaction with the Hyperclan, and the ubiquity and uniformity of that mediated experience.

The Hyperclan's media-based assault is predicated on the evacuation of the state's authority within a spectacular media marketplace, but it also relies on a specific construction of a spectating public that is primed to accept their authoritarian performances. In *JLA*, the public does not seem to share Superman's vision of a "heroic safety net" in which super-people serve as a backup for mundane humans' efforts to solve their own problems. If our brief view into the Whitehouse in the first four pages is representative, they have little reason to share his faith, and plenty of reason to question why he steps so reluctantly into the void of power left by government's "flight from commitment." Why refuse to lift us up, and wait instead for a seemingly inevitable fall? The public clearly *wants* heroes "who don't just spend their days pounding the stuffing out of one another" to maintain the status-quo, but use their powers to solve humanity's problems (*JLA* #1, sp 9).

The Hyperclan capture the attention of the media and the allegiance of the public by performing the political role that appeals directly to people who feel helpless to change their circumstances: the celebrity autocrat, a figure that has become all too familiar today. In the style of such leaders, in addition to populist miracles like transforming the Sahara desert into verdant farmland (*JLA* #1, sp 8), the Hyperclan also provide spectacles of punishment that cater to the public's frustration and fear, staging the extrajudicial execution of several supercriminals (*JLA* #1, sp 10).

Lingering on the ease with which the alien invaders optimize their performance to maximize their impact within contemporary media culture—and in doing so colonize the media space and manufacture consent for their invasion—*JLA* demonstrates that neither

the democratic state, nor the “free press,” as they existed in the late 1990s, are able to manage their portfolio of social responsibilities in the interests of the people. Once they are reduced to mere competitors in a marketplace of ideas, both politicians and journalists fail in their traditional gatekeeping and leadership roles, either helpless to stop, or actively abetting, the public’s rush to embrace the totalitarian spectacle offered by the Hyperclan. *JLA* implicates contemporary media culture for its role in producing of passive, easily manipulated citizens who are both individually and collectively unfit to manage themselves and their own political desires.

The key divisions *JLA* #1 sets up through this emphasis on mediated agency, then, are not the divisions found in *Watchmen*, *Batman and the Outsiders*, *Justice League*, or *Kingdom Come*. The key divide is not between superheroes and the public, or superheroes and the state, or even between democratic and fascist political impulses. These are merely symptoms of a more fundamental distinction between the *active* and the *interpassive*—between those who remain trapped in the circuits of consumption and deliberation, and those able to take action that produces results. This distinction ultimately justifies and even valorizes antidemocratic forms of neoliberal power that, Wendy Brown and others argue, coalesced and flourished amidst the “third way” politics of the 1990s.

At the level of the citizenry, democratic ideals of cosmopolitics ultimately founders on the twin rocks Mark Fisher calls interpassivity and reflexive impotence: by a highly mediated experience of agency, paired with the self-defeating belief that one cannot exert one’s own agency directly. *JLA* thinks what superheroism means in a world

where such interpassive impotence is the basic human experience of social power—they are the primary underlying reason the public fails the test implicit in Superman’s responsabilizing ethics. As in Fisher’s discussion of the zeitgeist of capitalist realism, in *JLA* the average human citizen “knows that things are bad, but more than that, they know that *they* can’t do anything about it” (*Capitalist Realism* 21). The average person’s experience of life in the disaster-prone DC universe is merely an extension of Fisher’s description of life in late capitalism which often feels like “action is pointless; only senseless hope remains” (*Capitalist Realism* 2-3). The status quo is clearly broken, yet neither the agents of state power, nor the incarnations of superpower seem able or willing to fix it.

When the Hyperclan announce that they are “here to house your homeless... feed your starving and to repair the damage you have done to your biosphere,” they both voice citizen’s own frustrations at the failure of the existing system, and offer to make good on the public’s “senseless hope” for change. Further, both the criticism and the change are combined into a spectacle that is offered for passive consumption, as form of entertainment that does politics in the viewer’s place.

Fisher argues that this dynamic, in which audiences outsource their political agency to the products they passively consume, is endemic to late capitalism. The pleasure of a film like *Wall-E*, in Fisher’s view, is that it replaces the passive anxiety that *nothing can be done* with the equally passive satisfaction of *seeing something done on our behalf*. As viewers consume the film as entertainment, part of the enjoyment they derive is witnessing the text perform the forceful critique of both capitalism and control

society that *we feel unable to effectively stage ourselves*. *Wall-E* offers a spectacular challenge to both political inaction and collective passivity, even as it reinforces the individual viewer's own continued passive inaction. Similarly, the Hyperclan offers its challenge to the “bad” political order represented by the USA—and the JLA's maintenance of that bad order—as a consumable media spectacle, one that promises to perform social agency on the audiences' behalf.

As with so many of his ideas in *Capitalist Realism*, Fisher's use of the term interpassivity is provocative and evocative, but not very precise. In order to map how JLA figures the political crisis of interpassive impotence in such a way as to valorize neoliberal governance, I turn to Dutch scholar Gijs Van Oenen's work on interpassivity and social power. Van Oenen argues that post-sixties ideals of participatory, *interactive* democracy have shaded into the unhappy reality of an *interpassive* politics. The rise of sophisticated technologies for both measuring and manipulating public opinion—famously expressed in the triangulating politics of Clinton and Blair, both of whom were accused of “governing by poll”—facilitated an unprecedented sense of mass involvement in the working of government, but Van Oenen argues that this was an increasingly interpassive involvement. The public is invited to participate ever more intensely in the process of cultivating and registering their individual views on how the “common good” *should* be defined, and what steps *might* be taken to get there, but that deliberation is increasingly disconnected from the production of actual, discreet legislative acts. The “production” of governmental effects—in the form of discreet legislation and Executive acts that create material social praxis—is increasingly separated from “earlier phases of

deliberation, consultation, and policy-formation.” Van Oenen argues this disassociation deliberative process from political product accounts for the diffuse sense of loss that haunts contemporary political life:

Our detachment from [political] product[s] is not necessarily reflective at the individual level. [...] Somehow we suspect that our continuous “access” to [political process] does not provide us with what we want or need, but we feel powerless to change our condition (“A Machine” ¶53)

Van Oenen’s definition of interpassivity in terms of productive process, and how the focus of our participation “shifts towards the earlier or preceding phases of the process” reveals complicated affective dynamics that work to legitimate anti-democratic forms of rule, even as these forms of governance also exclude the demos from the production of politics. In *Undoing the Demos* Brown discusses the social and political consequences that ensue when “civic participation is reduced to ‘buy-in’” within neoliberal governance practices (128). Van Oenen helps us better understand how that popular “buy-in” is achieved, and the affective dynamics that make it difficult to rouse the public from this false mode of involvement once they have “bought into it”—even when they are dissatisfied with the situation.

Van Oenen would argue that, while Brown is correct that “deliberation about justice and other common goods” has been separated off from the *practice* of governance, they have, paradoxically, come to dominate the public’s *experience* of the political process. Citizens are drawn ever further into a *public spectacle* of contending “visions of the public good,” even as they are excluded from the *civic* processes of administering the common. Ostensibly in the name of “contestation over values and purposes,” the highly visible “official” processes of representative democratic politics are perpetually stalled in

the “earlier phases of deliberation, consultation, and policy-formation,” forestalling their ability to “complete” the production of social praxis. (§ 44). This helps explain how Brown can argue that neoliberalism banishes “contestation over values and purposes” and partisan struggle from the practice of governance (*Undoing* 127), even as the public display of the personal partisan affiliations Van Oenen calls our “individual preferences and conceptions of the good” has become increasingly central to how Americans proclaim their cultural identity. (§ 44).

JLA’s exploration of these interpassive dynamics responds to new norms of hyperpartisan politics in the 1990s. It conflates American state power with the White House and so with the Executive power of the Presidency. One of the many “new normals” of neoliberal politics that took shape during Clinton’s reign is the “imperial presidency,” in which the Executive Branch expanded its governmental mandate in order to make both war and policy in the face of congressional obstruction following the “Republican Revolution” that took control of the House of Representatives in 1994. Both Executive and Legislative partisans framed their subversions of democratic protocols as attempts to channel the public’s interests through new channels. The actual result was the intentional production of legislative “gridlock” as political spectacle, an example of the kind of “nonproduct of politics” Van Oenen identifies, which is presented as a response to, and extension of, the public’s own involvement in that process.

Within neoliberalism, interpassivity functions as a process of sociopolitical enclosure that cuts up the “unbounded field of deliberation” that nourishes the *demos* and herds us into the paddocks of empty political spectacle. Politics and entertainment

become indistinguishable because both are experienced and interacted with the same way—as commodities to be passionately but passively consumed. Capitulation to the paralyzing structures of governance is not simply political laziness; rather, it can be seen as an effect of the structural affordances of the late capitalist social system.

Van Oenen defines several types of “pathologies of citizenship brought about by the development towards political interpassivity”. First there are normative or hegemonically interpassive subjects, for whom the mediated political interaction of consuming politically-themed products is enough. The process of choosing, consuming, and then *feeling about* the media texts (such as *The Daily Show* or *The Hannity Report*, or the carefully orchestrated media events of the Hyperclan in *JLA*) is sufficient participation in the political process.

Yet Van Oenen argues that many citizens’ “disappointment with the interpassive state of [their experience of the] political system” has deepened into thoroughgoing “resentment towards it.” Such “resentful citizens” have become detached from both the processes *and* the products of politics. The locus of their resentment shifts from that system to the most highly visible public participants in that system, “the producers of the non-product of politics—those who are visibly processing without delivering” (“A Machine” ¶ 65). The resentful channel their political energies not towards making collective connection with government more effective or more meaningful, as democratic idealists do, but rather towards supporting “(would be) politicians that boast to be *unconnected* to [the political] system and announce that, if elected, they will carry through a whole-sale refurbishment of the political saloon (“A Machine” ¶ 65). The

resentful citizen desires a political order that produces the product of politics without participation, without deliberation, without process. Ultimately, then, they yearn for the charismatic, aestheticized politics-without-politics of fascist autocracy.

This politics of fascist spectacle is exactly what the Hyperclan offers in *JLA*. The Hyperclan crafts their mediated personae of populist autocratic power through interpassive spectacles designed to “show you what can be done when the will is strong, the heart is pure, and the mind is clear” (*JLA* #1, sp 7)—a heroic will and clarity defined precisely against the messy struggles of the “unbounded field of deliberation” that gives democracy meaning (Brown 128). Van Oenen’s resentful citizens want to partake in the sphere of interpassive politics, not to pursue forceful and effective social practices, but exactly to “experience a blissful *relief* from social responsibilities.” “Bring us your problems and we will give you solutions in return” (*JLA* #1, sp 7). As in Fisher’s reading of *Wall-E*, the Hyperclan both diagnose the public’s sources of frustration with contemporary politics, and allows viewers to passively ‘participate’ in that critique. By staging their invasion as an “outsider challenge” to the establishment, *and* as an interpassive spectacle, the Hyperclan appeals simultaneously to normatively satisfied *and* cynically resentful citizens. These fraught interpassive dynamics are crucial to understanding the Hyperclan’s strategy, and why Superman fails so spectacularly in his initial attempts to publically challenge their growing influence.

In a televised address to a large crowd Superman offers a clear-eyed diagnosis of the Hyperclan’s strategy, condemning the Hyperclan’s actions as “spectacle” creating “false hopes” (*JLA* #1, sp 9). Yet he offers no “real” hopes to replace them. In keeping

with his mission statement for the League—“Humankind must be allowed to climb to its own destiny. We can’t *carry* them there” (*JLA* #4, 19).—Superman demands that humanity “revive or restore” cosmopolitical democracy on its own, but he does so without either acknowledging the neoliberal, interpassive forces that undermine democracy, or working to counteract those forces. So his earnest attempts warning against false hopes elicit hostility from a reflexively impotent public for whom, Fisher argues, “only senseless hope remains” (*Capitalist Realism* 2-3).

Superman’s attempt at directly addressing the public as a collective democratic subject—as a *demos*—fails not simply because interpassive neoliberalism has undermined the public’s ability to conceive itself as a *demos*, but because Superman fails to recognize that such “contestation over values and purposes” has become detached from the real processes of power—and that his human audience, viscerally aware of that detachment, would actually resent his recourse to it. Protex’s dismissive response is delivered not to Superman, but to the spectating television audience. “I understand [Superman’s] reservations and I’d be glad to discuss them,” followed in a separate balloon by “If he wants to know where to find me, I’ll be out ‘fixing’ the world” (*JLA* #1, sp 9). Protex neatly separates deliberation from action in the world, marking Superman’s attachment to the political *process* and identifying Protex instead with political *products*.

Superman’s desire to engage in rational political debate is therefore received by the resentful citizenry as evidence of his complicity with the frustrating and ineffective interpassive status quo that the Hyperclan *seems* to challenge. As Fisher argues, “there is a sense in which... the political elite are our servants; the miserable service they provide

for us is to launder our libidos, to obligingly re-present for us our disavowed desires as if they had nothing to do with us” (Capitalist Realism 15). In this sense, the Hyperclan serve to “obligingly re-present” the fascistic impulses simmering within the public’s growing resentment towards the triangulating, interpassive version of neoliberal rule pioneered by Clinton and Blaire in the 1990s. The success of the Hyperclan’s populist message of interpassive autocracy among both the normative and resentful segments of the citizenry in *JLA*, and Superman’s inability to reach either audience with his nostalgic appeals to cosmopolitical virtues, exposes the practical bankruptcy of traditional democratic processes, even they are they are elegiacally celebrated as the moral standard for legitimate rule. The public proves its inability to manage itself by siding with Protex’s spectacular fascism. The only alternative remaining is to abandon appeals to the “fallen” citizenry, and rule instead through the antidemocratic techniques of neoliberal governance.

Lurking within *JLA*’s brief portrait of human democracy in “New World Order,” then, is a self-justifying parable of neoliberal technocracy at the end of the millennium. The interpassive mode of neoliberal politics produces political crisis, fostering forms of “pathological citizenship,” which together conjure the specter of totalitarianism. Neoliberal governance is then presented as “the only alternative” to impending fascism. In *JLA*, the state, the media, and the public have all shown themselves unequal—or unwilling—to live up to the responsibilities of self-rule, to muster the collective political will needed to abjure the specters of populist autocracy and systemic collapse. Despite

Superman's heroic restraint, his good faith desire to allow democracy to "climb to its own destiny," only intensified intervention by the League can "catch" us as we fall.

But even as the Justice League reluctantly begins its heroic intervention into this latest crisis in human affairs, though, it rapidly that this time their bailout of failed democracy demands new skills: the speculative labor of power management. Until they can grasp and internalize the "Best Practices" of neoliberal heroism exemplified by Batman, the Superheroes of the League are as helpless the public they are trying to save.

3.3 Paralyzed Citizen-Heroes

Superman's attempt at intervention in the Hyperclan's construction of interpassive spectacle fails because he is unable to grasp how his defense of democratic participation is nullified by the affective dynamics of interpassive culture. Yet despite his lack of success, he is still the only League member who manages to engage proactively with Hyperclan in the first issue. With the crucial exception of Batman, the other members of the league are each introduced in the same way: out of costume, in their domestic spaces, each is shown riveted to various screens, captivated by the Hyperclan's spectacular media narrative in the same way the general public is (*JLA* #1, sp 6).

As in Superman's failed attempt to engage the resentful citizenry in earnest debate, this sequence recalls key cosmopolitical ideals of the classic 1960s Justice League, but twists them to show how distorted those values have become in contemporary neoliberal culture. Ramzi Fawaz argued that the 1960s *Justice League* "visualized the teammates' civilian and superheroic identities as metaphors for their dual loyalties to national and global forms of citizenship" (*New Mutants* 39), a metaphor the

series used to explore how claiming a global or even universal responsibility for the welfare of all unlocks the radical democratic potentials in politics, science, and civil society. In light of this history, introducing the characters in their “civilian” guises sets up an expectation that taking up their heroic identities might break the Hyperclan’s spell. But this is not the case in *JLA*. Even in costume, acting in their capacity as global heroes, the League members’ understanding of the situation, and thus their understanding of their own possibilities for response, is constrained by the interpassive nature of the Hyperclan’s media strategy. The heroes’ narrative blindness creates a double meaning to Green Lantern’s horrified cry “They’re coming out of nowhere!” when the Hyperclan inevitably moves directly against the Justice League in a sneak attack on their headquarters (*JLA* #1 sp 11).

Even after this brutal attack, which destroys the JLA’s orbital base and severely injures or kills several auxiliary characters, League members are still unable to effectively respond because they remain fixated on the Hyperclan as an interpassive spectacle—and so trapped within the circuits of deliberation, of “preparation and planning” that Brown and Van Oenen argue have been evacuated of meaning and agency in interpassive culture. This paralysis is manifested in a series of panels in final two pages of Issue #1. Superman announces his continued attempts to solve the problem through honest negotiation with the Hyperclan have been fruitless. The rest of the team stares, captivated, at the mediated image of their foe on a view screen. Rookie member Green Lantern teeters on the verge of accepting the Hyperclan’s narrative, while Martian Manhunter repeats the counter-evidence as if in a mantra, trailing off in an ellipsis that

implies he too is feeling doubts. The League's mystified frustration in these panel echoes both Fisher's description of reflexive impotence and Van Oenen's description of interpassive "loss": "somehow [they] suspect that our continuous 'access' to [interpassive spectacle] does not provide us with what we want or need, but we feel powerless to change our condition" ("A Machine" ¶53). Porter's art in the panel tilts the heroes backwards, as if the power of the Hyperclan's media narrative assault has knocked them back on their heels, rendering the Earth's most physically powerful heroes not only reactive, but effectively paralyzed. Despite their collective might, they are simply not equipped for effective struggle within neoliberal image culture and the interpassive relations that govern our participation in it.

Both their costumed and civilian selves, individually and collectively, the Justice League can't escape the role as interpassive media consumer, paralyzed by the Hyperclan's ability to capture the media narrative. As their helplessness and desperation in these panels illustrate, this is not a problem that can be solved by the League's traditional cosmopolitical commitment to egalitarian problem-solving and collective decision-making. Even when they come together, all they can do is repeat to each other what each has already seen in the media, a repetition which produces no new knowledge and instead reinforces their feelings of reflexive impotence. Like the institutions of human society it is their duty to protect, the cosmopolitical values of the Justice League have "fallen."

In "New World Order" each Leaguer leaves behind these cosmopolitical commitments, because acclimating to the demands of this new mediated neoliberal reality

can only be accomplished by more or less consciously emulating the approach of their resident power manager, Batman. While the league tries futilely to fill the evacuated space of democracy with more deliberation, more engagement with the Hyperclan's interpassive spectacle, Batman is able to navigate the evacuated space of democracy using the tools of neoliberal governance. Only by adopting first Batman's leadership, and then an apprentice version of his perspective and process, are the other JLA members able to become doers, to pass beyond mediated images to change reality. Even for the members of the Justice League, the way out of interpassivity and impotence, then, is relinquishing democratic self-governance and adopting neoliberal governance by "best practices"—the practices of *JLA*'s utterly, supremely neoliberal version of Batman.

3.3.1 Catching us as we Fall: Batman's Best Practices for Neoliberal Heroism

Batman finally appears on the final two pages of issue #1, after the institutions of human society *and* the ideals of the Justice League have all "fallen" before the mediated fascist spectacle of the Hyperclan. This pervasive sense of failure frames our reception of Batman's neoliberal heroism, giving his performance of power management new meaning distinct from those it carried in *Dune*. Where Paul was exceptional, his embrace of power management a risky personal experiment that led to both empowerment and corruption, in *JLA* power management is framed as a necessary corrective to a failing social order. In the face of the crisis of public sovereignty established in Issue #1, Batman's approach to power is presented as our only hope: in classic capitalist realist terms, "There is no alternative." Within this context, *JLA* normalizes power management and makes it the new normative form of heroic fantasy.

His first appearance is both a literal and a figurative response to the team's paralysis the preceding panels. The style and framing of this reveal establishes many of the basic relations between Batman and the rest of the League that will hold for the rest of the series. At first glance, this image seems to emphasize Batman's essential separation from the rest of the team. They cluster together, while he lurks apart, watching from above. This "oppositional" performance of threat directed at his teammates, created through the design of the character, the shadowed lighting, and his menacing posture, assures readers that the character's "darkness" and "seriousness"—those perennial points of fan engagement—will continue to play central roles in *JLA*. Further, Batman's "seriousness" is emphasized by his special separation from the rest of the team's affective need for contact and community in the face of their recent losses. By declining to participate in their moment of emotional solidarity, Batman emphasizes that he views his membership in the League through the lens of an exaggerated, hyper-rational "professionalism" that recognizes only pragmatic, instrumental ends to team collaboration. While he is "on the job" he interacts with the others only insofar as it facilitates the mission as he defines it.

Yet a closer look at the layout reveals that many elements of the composition point instead to Batman's continuity with the rest of the page. The panels showing the paralyzed league are inset into this final panel showing Batman—it forms the gutters between them. The actions and dialog of the League which I analyzed above, then, are framed, both implicitly by Batman's hidden surveillance, and literally by the grey surfaces of the computer equipment amidst which they stand. It is easy to overlook this

greyscale backdrop, against which the colorful costumes of the heroes pops into relief. In contrast, when Batman appears, perched amongst the wiring of the computing apparatus that has captivated his colleagues, his grey and black color scheme fits perfectly into the palette of that equipment. Both his position and his costume align him with the informatic machinery of calculation and projection. He is at home in the very medium that has paralyzed the rest of the team. He is intimate with its secret depths. While they are stuck on the shiny media surface of the informatic techno-structure, Batman penetrates into its wiry guts. This establishes visually what the next few panels will make clear in through dialog: Batman's affinity with and authority within the informatic media battlespaces where the Hyperclan has—so far—bested the League.

All this is intimated by this moment of separation and surveillance. But why does he wait an hour to stage his dramatic reveal? It seems like a lot of time to waste in the midst of such a crisis. First, the delay reflects the responsabilizing logic of democratic nostalgia that permeates *JLA*. Batman demonstrates his good faith support for the *ideals* of democracy by giving the team a chance to solve the problem through its traditional cosmopolitical processes before he intervenes to “catch them” as they fail. More specifically, though, Batman defers his intervention because in *JLA* he functions as an *idealization* of governance, and as Brown emphasizes, proclaims itself concerned with “how not to govern too much” (*Undoing* 56). He waits until it is clear that his intervention is required, and when he intervenes he speaks and acts as efficiently as possible. As in so many cases of neoliberal governance discussed by Brown and Martin,

though, the apparent restraint and economy of action in Batman's intervention belies the far-reaching effects of his restructuring of the team's heroic practices.¹⁵

Batman's introductory panel in *JLA* positions him as both inside and outside of the Justice League. This liminal position is key to understanding the form of authority he exercises in *JLA*. Like the majority of those who discuss Batman's role in *JLA*, Andrew Hoberek reads him as acting "as a kind of general" (*Considering* 59). While, as I argued in chapter 2, Batman's leadership in previous texts extrapolated from contemporary military strategies, *JLA* presents an evolution of this model. As Brown notes, the logic of governance profoundly alters traditional notions of "command and control" (*Undoing* 125, 127, 141). Intervening to "catch" the other Leaguer's "fall" into interpassive paralysis, Batman does not "take control" by claiming a formal leadership role, as he did in *Batman and the Outsiders* and the 1987 *Justice League*. His role in *JLA* is closer to that of the "management consultants" who supervise corporate restructuring. Batman troubleshoots the Justice League's problems by identifying obstacles and showing them how to use their existing assets to meet those challenges more effectively. He does not issue commands so much as make suggestions, but within the state of emergency that prompted his intervention, those suggestions take on the *force* of commands. His authority is based not on organizational hierarchies, but on the efficacy of his practices in the urgency of the moment. Batman's influence on the League in *JLA* follows the logic of "benchmarking," which, as Brown puts it,

¹⁵ Here Batman demonstrates one of the overlaps between the logic of governance and the logic of power management: both strive to generate the greatest possible effect from the smallest intervention.

“refers to the practice of a firm or agency undertaking internal reforms on the basis of studying and then importing the practices of other, more successful firms or agencies. . . . Benchmarking represents the process of non-leaders the practice of [industry leaders]” (*Undoing* 136).

In comparison to the general collapse of both human and heroic agency revealed by the Hyperclan’s invasion, Batman’s effectiveness establishes him as the “industry leader” the others must understand and emulate. Throughout “New World Order” the other League members realize that they need to “import” Batman’s techniques of power management in order to become effective heroes in contemporary society.

Shifting Batman’s authority away from assertions of hierarchical dominance, towards “governance” through his establishment of “benchmarks” for “best practice,” *JLA* short-circuits the tensions that defined his leadership of the team during the 1980s. It is impossible to stage the kind of petulant rebellion that Hal Jordan performed, for instance. But governance also forestalls the kind of resistance in the name of affective solidarity the Outsiders mounted in *Batman and the Outsiders*. As Brown argues, “emphasis on ‘what works’ eliminates from discussion” the political and ethical “dimensions of policy” (*Undoing* 130):

Best practices can be effectively contested only by positing better practices, not by objecting to what they promulgate. Formally, they are nonnormative, pure means, ‘exemplary behaviors modeled into processes.’ (*Undoing* 136).

Issue #1 of *JLA* offers a thoroughgoing demonstration that Batman’s practices are the only ones capable of taming the fascist tendencies within the fallen democratic system, which the Hyperclan “obligingly re-present” as authoritarian spectacle.

On the final page of Issue #1, Batman inaugurates his restructuring of the Justice League through governance and benchmarking. Batman’s first order of business is

disrupting the team's paralyzing 'participation' in the Hyperclan's media narrative. One effect of revealing himself so dramatically is to capture their energy and attention back from Protex's image on the screen. Once he has their attention, he asks Superman to scan for microwave transmissions. Superman confirms that a signal is being broadcast at the same frequency that "the human brain operates on." Batman is quick to diagnose the result: "Mind control."

These two brief panels establish the key aspects of Batman's financialized approach to heroism, which become "exemplary behaviors modeled into processes" that the other League members must integrate into their own heroic performances in the course of the "New World Order" arc. This exchange shows the sheer speed at which Batman's inductive reasoning works to process information, assess likely threats, and identify the League assets that best address those threats. Each of these exemplary behaviors is a form of cognitive labor recognizable from the portfolio of power management established in *Dune*.

3.3.2 "Mind Control": Embracing Finance Ontology's Instrumental Perspective

At first glance, Batman's diagnosis seems to efface the complicated issues of media manipulation within postmodern image culture developed so far in the issue, swapping them out for the reductive science fictional trope of "mind-control"—an easier concept to grasp, and a simpler problem to solve through heroic action. Rather than engage in wholesale reform of democratic society, the League just needs to find and destroy a few transmitters. But when we read Batman as an exemplar of neoliberal governance charged with "catching" a fallen interpassive democracy, the trope of "mind

control” does not *replace* the messy complexities of contemporary media culture; rather it *summarizes* and *concretizes* them. As Van Oenen argues, when interpassivity becomes the dominant mode of social experience, media culture becomes

... a kind of ‘experience machine’ [in which] participation in the public sphere means collectively experiencing emotions... de-subjectified and without aim. [...] Interpassive citizens literally let experience ‘get to them.’ (“A Machine” ¶ 77).

What better term for the purpose of instrumentalizing one’s impact within the “experience machine” of interpassive culture, as the Hyperclan does, than “mind control”?¹⁶ Re-framing the Hyperclan’s media strategies as “mind control” also shifts attention away from the apparent *content* of the Hyperclan’s media practices towards their *ends*. Batman’s diagnosis forces the League members to disengage from the *processes* the Hyperclan has hijacked, and focus instead on their *products*.

Batman’s ability to guide this shift of perspective in *JLA* is grounded in the financialized systems consciousness of the power manager. Unlike Superman, who fruitlessly attempts to engage the Hyperclan and the public in earnest “deliberation about justice” because he does not recognize that the public sphere no longer functions as an “*unbounded field of deliberation*” (Brown 127-8), Batman understands society as an complexly networked field of *competition*. Like Paul in *Dune*, Batman conceives of all human interactions, both public and private, “by postulating an ecology of ideas and values” in which competing capitals vie for competitive advantage (*Dune* 346). This

¹⁶ Like the autocratic populism of the Hyperclan, neoliberalism governance promises to restore the productivity of politics by excluding a debilitated interpassive public from the real processes of power. Thus, as neoliberal exemplar Batman’s own activities would themselves be a form of “mind control.” The fact that the *JLA* incarnation of Batman would likely agree to this diagnosis is a testament to his “gritty” and “serious” (capitalist) realism.

power management worldview expresses the finance ontology of neoliberal governance; the same one which grounds the Hyperclan's mediated assault on the state. Like the Hyperclan, Batman's heroism "reconceives the public realm" as an instrumentalized "domain of strategies, techniques and procedures through which different forces and groups attempt to render their programs operable" (Meehan, qtd in *Undoing* 127). From this perspective, Batman would see *all* interactions in the public sphere as attempts at regulating the human populace through "mind control," from his own vigilante terrorism in Gotham to the benevolent global policing of the League.

Batman has always been a detective, but in *JLA* his powers of deduction expand into financialized techniques of risk analysis and speculative extrapolation. Because he sees the world as a field of competing capitals, Batman scrutinizes all other agents as potential threats to his own competitive advantage. When interacting with other "forces and groups" competing to dominate the public sphere, Batman compulsively analyzes their actions and communications in order to identify an opposing capital's areas of activity, and to deduce the portfolio of "strategies, techniques, and procedures" through which they seek to "render their programs operable" in those specific areas.

Just as Batman evaluates others as opposing capital projects utilizing a portfolio of strategic assets, he understands both his own subjectivity and the collective project of the League in those terms. In applying this human capital perspective, not simply to himself and his own training, but to the League as a whole, Batman extends the "early adopter" version of the power manager as an *exceptional* subject developed in *Dune* into

a normative vision for *all* subjects seeking to “render their programs operable” in late capitalism.

3.3.3 Supercapital Development: Mobilizing the Justice League’s Heroic Portfolio

At the heart of the Batman character is a fantasy of personal development—the old Jeffersonian idea that diligently investing in your own self-improvement was a surer path to success than the improbable accidents of mad science or alien birth that created most comicbook superheroes. One of the perennial lures of the character, as Glen Weldon notes, is the way that this fantasy of development inspires “the abiding and borderline delusional conviction... that becoming Batman is an achievable goal.” This development fantasy at the heart of the character is also the reason that Weldon argues that “wealth is Batman’s true superpower.” (*Caped Crusade* 3). As a millionaire playboy, Bruce Wayne has unlimited time and money to invest in his own development, which allows him to achieve similarly unlimited results.

But while the ideal of the self-made polymath is old, within neoliberalism it takes on new aspects. As Brown notes, the narrative of self-development today is one in which the subject “entrepreneurializes itself at every turn as [...] human capital seeking to strengthen its competitive positioning [and] concerned with enhancing its portfolio value in all domains” (32-3). *Dune* laid the foundations for how this ruthlessly self-managed “figure of the human an ensemble of entrepreneurial and investment capital” translates into a problematic heroic figure, and in *JLA* Batman follows the narrative trajectory Herbert’s novel established. Unlike *Dune*, though, “New World Order,” though, gives us very little access to Batman’s interiority. Instead, we are introduced to Batman’s

exemplary human capital management through his interactions with his teammates. Not only does he view the Justice League as competitive capital entity with a portfolio of superheroic assets to be strategically managed, through his acts of management the League members come to understand themselves as human capital, and begin to *manage themselves* accordingly.

Batman's interaction with Superman, in which he diagnoses the Hyperclan's "mind control," is a demonstration of Batman's essential separation from, and exploitative relationship with, the rest of the League. It seems to show that Batman regards the other League members as a repository of capacities accessible for *his own use*, treating Superman no differently than he would any other Batcontraption in his arsenal. In this reading, the brusqueness of the encounter emphasizes how instrumentally Batman appropriates Superman's perceptions as a prosthetic extension of his own will—his clawed hand reaches into the grouped-up Leaguers to snatch the clue, and he spins back away from them as soon as he has what he needs.

Yet, the surface impression of separation belies a more complicated sense in which Batman is *both* an insider and outsider in this scene. While Batman could be seen as coopting Superman's powers here—appropriating the knowledge "value" created by his "labor" of Superhuman perception—we can more productively read this interaction if we consider the didactic and managerial effects of Batman's request.

When Batman asks Superman if he is able to detect microwaves, Batman already strongly suspects the answer—and he's already worked through the consequences either way. What Batman is really doing is reminding Superman that he possesses many

underutilized superhuman “assets” relevant to the situation. Superman’s powers give him access to an incredible range of perception. To retain his sanity and function in human society, Superman must actively ignore most of this information most of the time. Superman has been detecting the anomalous microwaves the whole time, then, but only with Batman’s help could he focus on this sensation, “know” it consciously, and recognize its value in the current situation. What is important is not only the way Batman appropriates the product of Superman’s labor, then, but also the fact that in demanding that product, he *activates* Superman’s latent capacity to produce such information, and shows how to *mobilize* that capacity to serve the interests of the League.

Batman’s activation and mobilization of Superman’s underutilized assets here is an idealized performance of neoliberal governance, which “replaces orders with orchestration, enforcement with benchmarks and inspection, and mandates with mobilization and activation” (*Undoing* 127). He performs similar interventions throughout the series, each time revealing new and flexible uses for the League members established repertoire of abilities. In doing so, Batman’s managerial “suggestions” model how each League member should remain alert to new opportunities in which their portfolio of capacities can be profitably leveraged—regardless of how those powers were configured and deployed in the past.

At the team level, Batman’s activation and mobilization of other team members underutilized powers enforces another principle of governance Brown identifies: “even as we are being tasked with being responsible for ourselves in a competitive world of other human capitals” we are also “human capital *for* firms and states concerned with their own

competitive positioning” (*Undoing* 37). Through his exemplary performances of management of both himself and other League members as portfolios of (super)human capital assets, Batman reframes the League itself as a Capital entity seeking to maximize its advantage within an unbounded field of competition. Batman provides a model for the ways the League that “draws from business an emphasis on integrating disparate elements into a harmonized set of ends, an integration that presumes the fungability and dispensability of each element” (*Undoing* 130). In the name of expediency, each League member must accept the possibility that at any moment, their powers could be taken out of their familiar contexts of use and recontextualized in ways they cannot anticipate, and thus cannot consent to beforehand. As Brown argues, as an organizational principle “benchmarking dispenses with history as a form of knowledge—how an organization of firm has traditionally or recently done things is irrelevant to how it should do them and must be the first thing jettisoned in a benchmarking process” (*Undoing* 136). Embracing the “best practices” of neoliberal superheroism means that each hero must be willing to think “outside the box” of their heroic identity and the traditional performances of power associated with it.

The final panel of Issue #1 shows the League freed from their media-induced torpor, “activated” and “mobilized” by Batman’s strategic management. They are framed by the sweep of his cape, just as their actions are now benchmarked by his best practices. Yet their respective placements within the layout shows that although Batman’s intervention has restored their ability to act, that agency is still constrained within the “box” of their outdated conceptions of heroic performance, just as they are constrained by

the grey boundaries of the panel. In contrast, throughout “New World Order” Batman’s figure consistently breaks out of the panels featuring him, symbolizing the freedom of action power management affords him. To “break free” as Batman has, they must not only internalize Batman’s exemplary style of financialized cognitive labor, but they must accept the frame in which he places neoliberal heroism in *JLA*: “war.”

Batman’s declaration of war is not simply an explicit confirmation that the League no longer holds to the cosmopolitical ideals of dialog, diplomacy, and universal ethical responsibility—though it is that. It is also an acknowledgement of the deep logic of neoliberal governance: the purpose of a capital subject is to compete with others for its right to exist. As Brown argues, neoliberal governance demands faith in “the interchangeability of processes and practices across industries and sectors and the consolidation of best practices out of many different sources” is possible because “the ultimate end of every organization is presumed to be the same: competitive advantage in the marketplace. As benchmarking expert [Robert Camp] puts the matter, the cognitive tools for “surviving in the market place are all forms of war, fought by the same rules”—know your enemy and know yourself (qtd in *Undoing* 137). As in *Dune*, knowing oneself and others is not a form of empathy but an instrumental *techne* of power-over: the reduction of the subject to a portfolio of deployable assets and exploitable weaknesses, and the world to field of competition in which that knowledge can be leveraged to competitive advantage.

3.3.4 Risk Management: Batman as a Fantasy of Privileged Precarity

At the center of the spectacles of cognitive labor through which Batman establishes the “best practices” of neoliberal heroism in *JLA* is his ability to generate and exploit this instrumentalized knowledge of the self and others. But small moments throughout “New World Order” also highlight Batman’s attentiveness to what he *does not* know, to the fact that his understanding of the strategic situation is always incomplete. In *JLA*, Batman’s most spectacular power is his ability to temper his instrumentalized “market knowledge” with his awareness of uncertainty, transforming both into calculated and managed *risks*. Yet his superhuman capacity for risk management is represented as arising precisely from his “only human” vulnerabilities. As Batman explains to Superman, his brusque, hyperprofessional interactions with the other League members, and his instrumental management of the teams’ super-capital assets, is rooted in his experience of comparative precarity.

I don’t have superspeed or invulnerability. I can’t risk wearing a bright costume that makes me a target, and I can’t afford to trust poorly-trained people who do.
(*JLA* #2 sp 17)

Batman argues that exposure to consequences is necessary for real appreciation of risk. This rearticulates his colleagues’ strength as a form of weakness. In allowing them to shrug off the consequences of lapses in planning or judgement, their ability to endure punishment becomes a form of privilege that perpetuates a complacent ignorance of a situation’s real risk conditions. In *JLA* superhuman power is accompanied by a form of risk-blindness, an ignorance about oneself and the world. In contrast, Batman’s

awareness of his human vulnerability is an important *source* of knowledge, the ground of his strategic genius.

One of the clearest expressions of the difference in perspective Batman's comparative fragility engenders comes Issue #4, in which Wonder Woman takes a fight up into orbit, based on the assumption that she could hold her breath longer than her Martian opponent. When Green Lantern asks her afterwards how long she can hold her breath, she admits she does not actually know. Wonder Woman can only conceive of her abilities as a kind of relative surplus: she knows she is exceptional, and so she takes it on faith that she is *more* exceptional than her foe. So secure is she in her self-confidence that she is baffled as to why anyone would know such a thing about themselves. "What a strange question! Why should anyone know how long they can hold their breath?" Passing by, Batman responds by stating his exact knowledge of his breath-holding capacity ("three minutes, fifteen seconds), and telling her "you'd be surprised why [I know]" (*JLA* #4, 14).

One way to read Batman's answer is as an invitation *for the reader* to imagine all ways Batman might take cleverly leveraged risks based on this precise measure of his own capabilities. But that would distract from the reason *Wonder Woman* would be surprised: Batman needs to know in order to calculate his chance of surviving precisely the kinds of situations *she* had just entered so carelessly. She would be surprised because she takes her invulnerability on faith when she takes risks, whereas Batman carefully and consciously manages the risk he chooses to take on. Developing such self-knowledge—a precise understanding of the limits, as well as the possibilities, of his own heroic

portfolio—is at the heart of his superlative strategic sense, allowing him to select the set of actions that will *leverage* his personal risk for maximum gain within the constraints of each situation.

Calculating the risks in every situation—which Batman must do in order to ensure his survival—leads him to calculate the most efficient, effective ways to *leverage* those risks in each situation. His only-human precarity within a world of superhuman competitors thus *forces* him to develop the power manager’s techniques for attaining maximum profit from minimal investment. Batman’s heroic persona in *JLA* is grounded in the unique perception of risk—and thus of opportunity—that this human vulnerability affords him. It is precisely because he is physically limited that he must “see first what others see only eventually.”¹⁷ It is also the source of his “cold” professional affect, which allows the character to retain the aura of “seriousness” crucial to fan support while jettisoning the “hot” rage and maniacal bluster that characterized hard body versions of the character. In *JLA*, Batman is risking his life constantly simply by entering the situations other League members take for granted. His every word and movement is a carefully leveraged risk taken at the edge of life and death. This entails a level of concentration and obsessive self-control that leaves no allowances for the impulsiveness and mania shown by hard body Batmen. The “seriousness” of the risks Batman chooses to take not only lends his character gravitas, but they also authorize his desire to manage the performance of the other members of the team. Batman insists that everyone raise

¹⁷ Qtd from a Franklin Templeton investment advertisement, and a concise description of the idealized forms of financial vision I analyzed in “Seeing the Present, Grasping the Future.”

their game to match his own intensity and self-control, simply because, if they do not, they narrow the already thin margins of risk he operates within.

The logic of privileged precarity Batman articulates, which links risk-awareness to vulnerability, also helps explain why Batman is particularly effective against the Hyperclan, *and* why he is able to claim an intensified moral authority within the League's struggle against them. Each member of the Hyperclan has the superpowers of the whole JLA combined. While this makes them extremely hard to defeat in a conventional superheroic context, it also means that they are *especially* blind to risk. The dialogue between Hyperclan members shows that they think primarily in terms of physical "toughness" (see esp *JLA* #2 sp11, and #3, 16). Like Wonder Woman, their assessment of threats is relative: the Clan employs subtle means of manipulation against Superman and Martian Manhunter because their powers are roughly equivalent. Against the rest of the heroes, they are happy to trust in their brute power. Like an army organized to duke it out in conventional warfare with an equivalent nation's military, though, the Hyperclan is unable to conceive of or respond effectively to asymmetrical threats. They cannot think past their own reliance on their surplus of power, and so they cannot imagine how an opponent would mobilize lesser resources.

Batman is able to exploit the Hyperclan's combination of power-surplus and risk blindness. "I'm 'only human' ... they don't believe that I pose a threat That gives me an edge" (*JLA* #3.3). Protex sums up their attitude: "what can a pathetic, fragile creature like Batman do to us?" (*JLA* #3, 15). Even after Batman has picked off one of their number, their rhetoric of toughness prevents them from evaluating the risks clearly: "ooh,

this Batman must be tougher than we think. I'd like to see *how* tough." Batman lures more of the Hyperclan into his trap by exploiting the same disparity in risk awareness that separates him from the rest of the League—demonstrating that it is a potential weakness *of* the league that only he has the perspective and discipline to correct.

Ironically, then, through this logic of privileged perspective gained through relative precarity, Batman's resistance to the Hyperclan's invasion, and the reforms to the League's organization and overall performance of heroism, take on a distinctly populist edge of their own. In an appropriative moment similar to those in *Dune*, Batman's comparative precarity amongst the superhumans of the League affords him a position of privileged vision. The billionaire aristocrat, whose performance of power embodies the antidemocratic techniques of neoliberal governance and the exploitative drives of speculative finance, Batman can also claim to be the underdog who learns to make do with less. Despite coming from the very top of socioeconomic elite, in *JLA* Batman gets to claim the "view from below." The contrast of Batman's neoliberal governance with Superman and Wonder Woman's commitment to democratic nostalgia, then, is complicated by this latent sense that it is they who are the real elitists, and Batman who truly understands the perspective of those rendered precarious by the chaos of disorganized capitalism and the cruel mandates of responsabilization.

Despite having the fewest superhuman "assets" of his own, Batman consistently proves himself a superior self-manager, and through that self-management, he dominates those who are spendthrift with their surpluses of power. Within the field of superpower, Batman serves as the ultimate conservative bootstrap fantasy, turning his "poverty" into

strength through disciplined investment. This is another way that *JLA*'s version of Batman idealizes neoliberal governance and finance ontology, and presents them as the necessary frameworks upon which any "serious" attempts to reform "fallen" institutions and confront creeping fascism must build.

3.3.5 Leadership, Governance, and Devolution

This turn towards risk consciousness, capital management and governance as the models for the League's organization is evident in *JLA* editor Ruben Diaz response to a letter asking about the new team's leadership structure, in which he explains that "the team is led by whoever's skills are best suited for the task at hand" (*JLA* #4). This is a far cry from the original cosmopolitical League that modeled itself on the deliberative humanism of the United Nations. As the team's paralyzation in issue #1 demonstrated, the old methods of collective decision-making are no longer effective. Switching up leadership to adapt to "the task at hand" reflects the new logics of flexible production, characterized by "a willingness to let the shifting demands of the outside world determine the inside structure of institutions" (Sennett, *Corrosion* 52). When the League itself becomes a flexible capital subject, on the model Batman provides, each team member could go from managed asset to managerial subject at a moment's notice. While, in practice, Batman's skills tend to be "best suited" to managing the team, and thus he achieves a kind of *de facto* dominance over the League, the hovering possibility that they might have to take up the managerial role has the effect of devolving Batman's own managerial imperatives onto each team member.

This new ad-hoc mode of leadership also reflects an evolution of RMA doctrines that *Batman and the Outsiders*' version of Batman explored in the 80s. Analyzing the new next generation of networked –warfare fantasies that emerged in the wake of the first Gulf War, Randy Martin argues that both the privileges and responsibilities of strategic vision have been devolved to lower. “No longer is the big bang of high tech reserved for the [top level] commander Anyone can play, each with a managerial role” (*Indifference* 80). But taking on these demoted forms of managerial authority also means these “battle managers” must up the instrumental, antagonistic perspective of risk management and manage themselves according to its dictates. As Brown notes, such “devolved power and responsibility are not equivalent to thoroughgoing decentralization and local empowerment devolution of power to ever smaller and weaker units ... aimed at ‘entrepreneurializing’ them, [results] in a mode of governance that political scientist Joe Stross describes as “at once muscular in its normative enforcement and diffuse in its organization” (*Undoing* 132). In *JLA*, each League member must develop the ability and the discipline to manage themselves and each other as efficiently as possible.¹⁸

While Batman releases the League from its interpassive paralyzation at the end of issue #1, they have not yet “imported” his forms of financialized cognitive labor into their own heroic subjectivity. In Issue #2, the team follows its old habits, splitting up to

¹⁸ Thus, neither Green Lantern’s worries about his readiness to join the organization, nor Aquaman’s resistance to its new leadership structure challenge this norm, so much as they set up character arcs where both come to accept their place in the new structure of neoliberal governance. This nascent-manager anxiety replaces the downsizing/reorganizational anxiety that drove both the humor and drama of the 1987 *Justice League*.

confront the Hyperclan at points across the globe. Each member relies on their own power set, deployed in the way they have always deployed it. The result, for all of them, is disaster and defeat. Aquaman and Wonder Woman are knocked unconscious and taken captive, Green Lantern is cornered and outnumbered, and Superman is incapacitated by a piece of Kryptonite the Hyperclan possesses. Batman disappears after his Batplane is destroyed. But it is through these defeats that the League realizes that “understanding, distilling, and then implementing” the forms of cognitive labor at the heart of Batman’s neoliberal heroism is the only way to survive and defeat the Hyperclan.

The opening of Issue #3 stages this process clearly, by cutting between scenes narrated from Batman’s perspective and scenes from the Flash’s. The Flash is slowly losing his fight against his Hyperclan double, Züm. His inner monologue in this sequence foregrounds his *lack* of knowledge, both about Züm’s identity and capacities, and about how best to utilize *his own* powers to counter those capacities. “I just wish I knew what I was dealing with,” the Flash thinks, “Just running fast isn’t going to get me through this one. Züm’s *smart*.... using superspeed in a *tactical* way. If I don’t start thinking the way he does, I’m in trouble.... I need *strategy*. I need *tricks*” (*JLA* #34-5). The Flash’s frustration with his ignorance about his foes is juxtaposed with Batman, who having escaped the crash of his plane is shown infiltrating the Hyperclan’s base, coolly asserting that he already has “everything I need, including the one clue that makes [the Hyperclan] vulnerable. I know exactly where they are from. I know who they are” (*JLA* #3, 3). While he does not actually share that knowledge with the audience in this scene, Batman shows that it is possible to gather exactly the kinds of instrumental intelligence the Flash now

understands is necessary—if one performs the forms of cognitive labor Batman exemplifies.

In one of the most climactic sequences of “New World Order,” Superman does just that. At the close of Issue #3, Batman ambushes three members of the Hyperclan, luring them into a trap. He deduces the “secret” of their species from an analysis of the portfolio of abilities they flaunted in their public personae as the Hyperclan. “Super-strength, flight, invulnerability, shapechanging, mind control: you’re *Martians*, aren’t you?” From these strengths, Batman discovers their weakness, “the one thing that robs your people of their powers... fire” (*JLA* #3, 19). On the first page of Issue #4, Superman slowly works through the same deductive steps that Batman modeled for the reader at the end of Issue #3. Incapacitated by the kryptonite radiation, both his physical and mental abilities are weakened. But as he works through the chain of reasoning Batman pioneered in the previous issue, he slowly comes to the realization that there may *be no* kryptonite. If the Hyperclan has mind control powers, Superman realizes, he might only be experiencing “psychosomatic symptoms triggered by a telepathic implant” (*JLA* #4.1). In this sequence, it is the immaterial labor of deduction that allows Superman to literally shatter his bonds and so regain the agency to actively protect the human population. All of Superman’s powers are useless until Batman’s style of strategic thinking guides them, even if Superman has to do that thinking himself.

This sequence builds visually on the metonymic links between the Hyperclan’s “mind control” and the dynamics of interpassive media culture discussed above. The “psychosomatic symptoms” of paralysis Superman experiences under the Hyperclan’s

control echo the reflexive impotence of capitalist realism and evacuation of active agency by interpassive relations. The cognitive labor of power management—linked to neoliberal governance in *JLA*—is the only counter to these paralyzing social forces. Again, the implication is that “there is no alternative.” Superman is literally paralyzed until he can complete this cognitive labor. Only once he has followed Batman’s example and produced the knowledge of himself and his opponents necessary for successful “war” between capital subjects, is Superman able to bring his physical might to bear on the situation.

Once Superman has freed himself from his psychic bonds by “understanding, distilling, and then implementing” the basic cognitive strategies of Batman’s power management, the tide turns decisively in the Justice League’s favor, and the Hyperclan’s fate is sealed. Accepting the new *normative* demands of power management is thus the precondition to victory in “New World Order.” Truth, Justice, and the American way can only succeed if they are pursued within the framework of neoliberal governance.

3.3.6 Managing Soft Power: Trust and Authenticity as Exploitable Assets

At the close of the issue #4, the League has defeated the leaders of the Hyperclan and taken control of the broadcast facilities that maintain their “mind control” over the passive masses of Earth. But this is only a pause in the larger struggle. While the League struggled against the leadership, the Martian invasion fleet has arrived on Earth. They know how to defeat the aliens, but do not have the numbers or time required to stop the invading army. As their victory threatens to slip away, Superman asks Batman “How do you want to handle this?” “*Decisively*,” Batman replies. “What can we use?” (14). Again,

Batman turns instinctively to the question *what are our assets? How can we best deploy them to maximize their impact?* What is available, of course, is the Martian's broadcast equipment. "These cameras are connected to every television set in the world... everything's set up. Who wants to do the talking?" (15). Green Lantern and Batman argue that Superman must be the one to address the world. As Batman argues, "they'll trust you." Superman goes on the air to tell the whole world the invaders weaknesses. He admits that the League alone can't stop the invasion. The public must do it themselves—though they will be armed with the knowledge the League's struggles have won. "We're on our way, but we can't reach everyone in time. It's up to you to defend one another. They're afraid of fire! Use fire against them!" Rallied by Superman's words, armed with the knowledge of the invaders' secret weakness, the human population rises up and defeats the invasion. The day, it seems, is saved.

"New World Order's" finale thus returns us to where the arc started, to the issue of mass media, mass communication, and to the proper relation of superheroic intervention and human agency, and it *seems* to reaffirm the democratic cosmopolitical ideals that the opening cast into doubt. Superman was able to communicate and *collaborate* with the public, sharing information and power with them to accomplish a common goal. The public was able to act effectively on their own behalf, forcefully renouncing their former allegiance to the Hyperclan's authoritarian spectacle. Though the human public and its institutions might have fallen early in the story, in the climax they prove themselves worthy of Superman's faith, and thus they rise to the challenge of responsabilization, justifying those policies as legitimate tools of social discipline.

It *seems*, therefore, that Marc Singer was right to argue that *JLA* “turns the genre’s potential conservatism into a progressive repudiation of the use of force to impose political agendas” (*Combining*, 152-153). Yet this redemptive interpretation falls apart under closer inspection, missing all the ways that the League’s democratic ideals were re-situated within the neoliberal field of power management in “New World Order,” and ignoring crucial details of Superman’s final interaction with the public. First, it elides the fact that Superman’s public performance of moral leadership in this scene is made possible by his acknowledgement that the ultimate ground of struggle is the competition for superior knowledge and position—something he learned through his own belated performance of cognitive labor at the start of Issue #4.

Second, it elides the extent to which, through Batman’s strategic management, Superman’s aura of truth and authenticity is instrumentalized, becoming an exploitable asset which can be alienated and recombined with the very apparatus of interpassive “mind control” it was defined *against* in the opening issue. Rather than a radical expression of global citizenship and ethical responsibility, Superman’s affective bond with humanity becomes another item in the portfolio of a League reconceived as a capital subject, just one more answer to the question “what can we use” to maintain its competitive advantage?

Third, and perhaps most damning, the public’s response to Superman’s instructions does not actually support the argument that they have escaped from the state of interpassive consumerism that drives the crisis of democracy in *JLA*. In dramatic before-and-after panels Morrison and Porter show how the public is “transformed” by

Superman's performance of democratic collaboration (*JLA* #4, 16). Throughout the crowd in this panel, we can see symptoms of the "depressive hedonia" Mark Fisher diagnoses as the characteristic response to the slow apocalypse of late capitalism. Even here, at the end of the world, the citizenry's obsessive consumerism is demonstrated, not only by the prominent brand logos on many crowd members' clothing, but by the fact that one of the men is actually selling "official invasion shirts." The apocalypse itself becomes a branded item, another interpassive spectacle to be consumed, participated in and felt about. Human extinction is just another channel in the "experience machine" of modern media culture.

Once we recognize the interpassive nature of the public's "participation" in the spectacle of human annihilation, we can appreciate how similar their reaction is when Superman offers to reframe that spectacle as one of mass mobilization and mass action. The concert imagery recalls Mark Fisher's diagnosis of the Live Aid charity events as quintessential examples of capitalist realism's cooption of political protest. What remains is a consumable, interpassive spectacle of rebellion, evacuated of real political stakes, "a kind of carnivalesque background noise to capitalist realism" (*Capitalist Realism* 14). As Van Oenen argued, within the "experience machine" of contemporary culture, the collective mood can be joyful or grieving, a silent march or a loud display of aggression, and one can instantly change into the other" ("A Machine" ¶ 77). That is exactly what we see here. Superman does not break the spell of interpassive relations. He merely changes the tone of the spectacle the public collectively consumes. The public is simply doing

whatever the broadcast system instructs them to do: first they interpassively consume the spectacle of extinction; then they interpassively consume the spectacle of rebellion.

By framing both before and after panels through interpassive consumerism, *JLA*'s "triumphant" conclusion ultimately confirms the "fallen" nature of human democratic institutions. The Hyperclan's totalitarian menace was ultimately only a symptom of this deeper political ill. This diagnosis affirms the legitimacy of the profoundly antidemocratic techniques of neoliberal governance as "the only alternative" to dysfunction and looming fascism—and extends the term into an indefinite future.

3.4 A Completed Transformation, for both Batman and the DCU

The conclusion to *Kingdom Come* offered a backhanded acknowledgement of neoliberalism's ascendance, but disavowed its dominance through the magical deferral of the systemic crisis in which power management becomes visible. Batman is a necessary evil, but he remains in the shadows, while Superman rules in the light. In "New World Order," that fantasy collapses. Batman and the neoliberal governance he represents take center stage. Superman remains the exemplar of cosmopolitical ethics, but both he *and* those ethics are subordinated to the logic of finance ontology. Neither can become an active, useful force in the world without passing through, and being re-articulated by, the forms of cognitive labor modeled by Batman's performances of power management. Power management has become the normative standard, just as neoliberalism has become dominant in the large culture. With "New World Order," Batman's slow transformation, begun fifteen years before in *Batman and the Outsiders* is finally complete.

Not once in the opening “New World Order” story arc does Batman throw a punch. The heroic actions we see him perform all consist of cognitive labor: of induction, instruction, and strategy. Such cognitive labor—displaying exactly the capacities that distinguish Batman within the League—is the only thing that saves the world from the “bad League” represented by the Hyperclan. From the get-go, the field of superheroic struggle that Morrison, Porter, and Dell establish in “New World Order” is firmly and clearly informatized. Information, strategy, the manipulation of public knowledge and affect, these are the real issues at hand.

Despite being “just a man,” interpassive, mediated framework not only suspends traditional cosmopolitical ethics, it puts the rest of the team onto Batman’s home turf, and he spends much of this arc as strategic coordinator directing the use of their powers to best effect. As was the case in *Dune*, martial power and physical confrontation remain an essential part of power management heroics in *JLA*, but they are subordinated to the immaterial labor of power management. The cosmopolitical practices of the 1960s League have been fully replaced with the neoliberal governance. In the name of efficiency and effectiveness, Batman becomes *de facto* commander of the group, defining its strategy and the allocation of its resources, but he governs now through consensus and buy-in, rather than through threats and force. Also like in *Dune*, ethical and affective performances are subsumed as well. In the climax of “New World Order,” Superman’s moral authority, diplomatic ability, and position of public trust are themselves reconfigured as manageable assets, social capital to be carefully husbanded and tactically deployed in service of the team’s strategic goals. Not only is Batman established as the

master of the League's collective superheroic capacities *and* ideological resources, he is established as the paragon of what effective superheroism is. Batman's transformation catalyzed the larger transformation of the meaning of superheroism within the DCU as a whole.

Power management's emergence into dominance as the popular fantasy of power in the late 1990s—indexed here by Batman's ascendancy within the narrative universe of *JLA*—corresponds to neoliberalism's normalization as the structural logic of globalized Imperial power. No longer a discreet strategy of power articulated within the professional discourses of war and finance, as it was in the 1980s, in the 1990s the fantasy of power management resonated with the governing rationality of the capitalist world system as a whole—on the macro level, with “the West” and “the North” as socioeconomic projects; on the micro level with the aspirational individual imperatives to self-improvement, self-promotion, and self-management that underlay mainstream cultural politics on both left and the right during the period.

3.5 Aftermath: Thinking the Proliferation of Power Management

While “New World Order” stages the becoming hegemonic of neoliberal relations, and the normalization of power management heroism, going forward *JLA* is increasingly concerned with the Justice League's struggle to deal with the proliferation of these skills. While they fight their share of old-school mad inventors and alien conquerors, the greatest threats to the League are posed by villainous power managers, who take up Batman's approach to power and turn it back on the League. In these stories, Batman's doubles illustrate the disastrous effects of power management's normalization

as a mode of power. No longer contained as the practice of exceptional hero figures, power management itself becomes a systemic risk to the fragile world order the Justice League struggles to maintain.

The two story arcs that best illustrate the threat posed by proliferating power management are “Rock of Ages” (*JLA* #10-15) and “Prometheus Unbound” (*JLA*#16-17). In both of these stories, the villains employ financialized power management techniques that explicitly parallel Batman’s “Best Practices,” while the League is portrayed as particularly vulnerable to those techniques. These encounters set up the “Tower of Babel” arc, published in the spring of 2001, in which Ras al Ghul turns Batman’s own power management against the League. I close my examination of Batman as neoliberal exemplar with a brief discussion of these three arcs, focusing on how they explore the consequences when the whole world fully embraces the precepts of finance ontology.

The “Rock of Ages” storyline sprawls across alternate timelines and dimensions, but it is initiated by a series of attacks masterminded by Lex Luthor. Here, *JLA* restages the paralleling of Luthor and Bruce Wayne so important in *Kingdom Come*, and it does so *within* the regular continuity of the DCU. If anything, “Rock of Ages” is even more explicit in drawing connections between the two characters, their methods, and their capacities. A consistent thread used to connect them is their common assertion that the discourses and methods of financial capital are uniquely and universally effective tools of power. Within finance ontology, every subject must manage themselves as such a capital project, with a portfolio of capacities and assets that must be shrewdly invested in the opportunities of the moment. To draw again on Meehan, governance “reconceives the

public realm” as an instrumentalized “domain of strategies, techniques and procedures” (*Undoing* 127). Monologues by both Luthor and Batman show how thoroughly this finance ontology of neoliberal governance has saturated the narrative in *JLA*.

Consider this speech from the first “Rock of Ages” issue, in which Luthor justifies his leadership to the members of his “Injustice Gang” based on his possession of the all-powerful corporate discourse:

This time we’re playing by *my* rules, and this time we will *win*. Clear? We don’t fight them in the streets like brawlers. We apply the principles of the **boardroom** and we plan. We Observe. We identify their weak points, destabilize their figureheads, and headhunt the up-an-coming young... hotshots... [...] I want you to regard Superman and his white knights as a **rival company** [...] wait for my signal... and prepare for the corporate takeover of the Justice League. (*JLA* #10,19, original emphases)

Here the implicit linkages between Batman’s “Best Practices” for superheroism and the language of investment capital are brought right to the surface of the text. Consider how the following bits of Batman’s dialogue, from scenes in which he investigates Luthor’s plans and mobilizes the League against them, pick up on and amplify the themes and values of finance ontology, affirming Luthor’s contention that “the principles of the boardroom” are supremely effective and dangerous:

I think those holograms were remote device, monitoring and analyzing every move we made against them. I think they were designed and manipulated to record our strengths and weaknesses. (*JLA* #10, 16)

Someone’s assembled an anti-league and I think we can assume they’re trying to undermine us behind the scenes, prior to a possible physical confrontation. I’m compiling a database on likely first choice candidates for a criminal force designed to oppose our current team. (*JLA* #11.5)

Both of these quotations share with Luthor’s statement an emphasis on viewing both subjects and organizations as competitive agents deploying their assets on a complexly

networked field of competition. Batman's comments, in particular, show his awareness of the Justice League as such a capital project, whose actions to "render [its] program operable" inevitably expose exploitable information about its own capacities and weaknesses. When he deduces that Luthor is behind the attacks, he echoes Luthor's belief that the entrepreneurial processes of corporate raiding are superior to the traditional practices of superheroism:

Conclusion: The reformation of the JLA has inspired our enemies to assemble a team of their own, with Lex Luthor calling the plays. Ordinarily, I'd say we were in trouble, but we have an advantage here. Luthor still has no idea he's dealing with someone who's as familiar with corporate takeover techniques as he is. Someone who plays the games much better than he does... Bruce Wayne. (*JLA* #11, 22)

In this sequence, parallels between Bruce Wayne and Lex Luthor as financialized masterminds are made through Porter's panel layouts as well as the echoes in word choices—both are shown seated on throne-like chairs, fingers steepled, with dramatic shadows making them appear equally ominous. Batman, like Luthor, is making the basic claim of finance ontology: that every form of human endeavor would best be managed according to the protocols of entrepreneurial investment. In Batman statement that the League would be "in trouble" if they didn't have access to their own entrepreneurial specialist (Wayne himself) to counter Luthor's "corporate takeover techniques, we can see echoes of benchmarking expert Camp's conflation of management with war. Implicit in this statement is another echo of Luthor's speech: without Wayne around to "apply the principles of the boardroom" the other League members would resort to fighting "in the streets like brawlers"—which in turn recalls Bruce Wayne's admonition to Superman in *Kingdom Come*:

Control is a delicate matter. It requires finesse, careful planning against those enemies more hidden.... Without, I might add, Superman and the Justice League booming into town—punching now, asking questions later.... I have my own controls in place, thank you. They may be slower and more methodical than yours, but they get results. (*Kingdom Come* 73-4)

As series editor Rueben Diaz put it, “if the DCU were a wheel, *JLA* would be at its center. Luthor and Batman’s duel of fiscal prowess in “Rock of Ages” pushes the finance ontology that formed the subtext of *Kingdom Come* and “New World Order” right to the surface of the text, and inscribes it directly into the DC canon going forward.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the next plot arc should, for the first time, threaten the team with a fully formed *evil* power manager explicitly modeled on Batman. In “Rock of Ages,” Lex Luthor—like Maxwell Lord before him—worked as a dark shadow of Bruce Wayne’s financial skillset. In *JLA* #16-17, though, the League faces a new villain, Prometheus, who emulates the full scope of Batman’s heroic portfolio—both his mental *and* his physical skillsets.¹⁹ Like Batman, Prometheus is an autodidact and a polymath, and he manages to neutralize the whole Justice League, one by one, through a Batman-esque combination of opposition research, preparation, contingency planning, and unorthodox deployment of his intensively developed human capital.

In terms of the skills and powers he has developed, then, Prometheus maps closely onto Batman’s power management. *Unlike* Batman, though, Prometheus’s self-management has been *automated*. Whereas Batman developed his vast array of

¹⁹ Through this explicit doubling, both characters work to expand the boundaries of Batman’s power management abilities—with many of those new capacities being very reminiscent of the Paul’s Mentat and Bene Gesserit-derived abilities in *Dune*. In a sequence that recalls Jessica’s BG training in *Dune*, Batman is shown evaluating another character’s “muscular movements and characteristic mannerisms [which] suggest a fairly stable personality type” (*JLA* #16, 2).

competencies the old fashioned way—through decades of training and study—Prometheus uses technology in his helmet to download knowledge and skills directly into his nervous system. This reliance on technological, cybernetic prosthetic enhancement proves to be Prometheus’s undoing, both in this first confrontation, and again later in the “World War III” arc. In both cases, Prometheus’s attempt to improve on Batman’s project of human capital development using technology to bypass on time and labor Batman expended—to substitute the virtual for the visceral—results in disaster. His cybernetic enhancements give him access to more “assets,” but he is not capable of managing them all, and so the scale of his “capital project” overwhelms him. In his first assault on the Justice League, he manages to defeat most of the team, but ultimately fails when he is unable to absorb all the information his helmet is pouring into his brain. In attempting to skip the Batman’s training process, he failed to develop the ability to effectively integrate and synthesize the capacities his tech gives him. As was the case with Batman’s tutelage of Superman in “New World Order,” Prometheus’s tech gave him access to more knowledge about his opponents, and more assets to use against them, but he failed to develop critical knowledge about himself, and that cripples his power management.

Within the developing trajectory of power management, Batman’s defeat of his cybernetically enhanced double is an important moment. It shows that power management has proliferated to the point that, far from being exceptional, Batman’s approach to it can be figured as *traditional* in comparison to his innovative competitors. Batman’s labor intensive, psychoprosthetic power management now falls under the trope

of the “old man’s *dependable* but *old fashioned* tech”—akin to the “revolver that never jams compared to the high capacity automatic” dynamic of 80s and 90s cop dramas. Further cementing Batman as slightly old-fashioned in his power management—though no less effective for that—in the “Prometheus Unbound” arc we learn that Batman has actually *outsourced* many of the network-based parts of his intelligence operations to the former Batgirl Barbara Gordon, now operating as the online information broker Oracle. Batman brings Oracle into the League, but she remains clearly subordinated to his authority, and he often calls upon her as an extension of his established power management portfolio.²⁰

Even as an inferior copy of Batman, Prometheus demonstrates the danger the proliferation of power management poses to the League. As he boasts to Green Lantern and Flash after mortally wounding them, “I know a dozen way to defeat every single one of you. I have dossier files for every ‘superhero’ on the planet.” (*JLA* #17, 2). Having an uncanny double of Batman utter these threats serves two functions: first, it highlights that more power managers like Batman are loose in the world. Like nuclear weapons and other technological terrors, power management is a proliferating technology of destruction that the League must devote resources to monitoring and countering from

²⁰ Oracle is a fascinating character in her own right, a woman with disabilities who takes on many of the traits associated with power management. As with Jessica in *Dune*, however, Oracle’s personal ethics preclude the kind of sociopathic self-abnegation required to fully embrace power management as Batman and Paul Atreides have. But in her capacity as the League’s “Data Central.” and when managing her own team of operatives, the Birds of Prey, Oracle is rarely willing to exploit her agents’ as capital assets as ruthlessly and dispassionately as Bruce or Paul do. Indeed, *Birds of Prey* is about building mutually reinforcing networks of female connection, affection, and empowerment, which puts it fundamentally at odds with the power management narrative in which one’s empowerment is contingent on sardonic distance achieved through the sacrifice of affective bonds.

here on out. Second, it forces readers to consider Batman himself as a potential threat to the League and the World, if his legendary self-control should slip, or his weaponized knowledge should fall into the wrong hands—as it eventually does in “Tower of Babel.” “Tower of Babel,” written by Mark Waid, is the first story arc after Grant Morrison’s departure from *JLA*, yet in it many of the themes and tendencies from Morrison’s run converge. No longer is the League threatened by doubles or shadows of the Dark Knight. In this four issue story, Batman’s long-time antagonist Ras al Ghul manages to both shatter Batman’s self-discipline and take control of his techniques of power management. First, al Ghul exhumes the bodies of Batman’s parents, and then dangles the possibility of their resurrection before a horrified Wayne. While Batman is so distracted, al Ghul’s agents break into Batman’s secret files and steal the various contingency plans he had developed in case any of the other League members turns evil, becomes possessed, gets cloned, or otherwise becomes a threat. Al Ghul uses Batman’s own stratagems to disable the Justice League in ingenious and invariably *painful* ways, strategies which speak to the intimacy of Batman’s knowledge of his friends. Each countermeasure in some way exploits and leverages their trust in him, and they soon know he was responsible.

The League ultimately rallies to defeat al Ghul. They recover from their physical wounds. But the breach in trust is much slower to heal. While Batman offers hyperlogical explanation of the strategic value of his precautions, but cannot understand why the other League members cannot forgive his weaponization of their trust in him, and the paranoid secrecy with which he planned the weapons and traps—he went to the extreme of using

his mastery of hypnosis to make himself “forget” some of his own plans, so that Aquaman and Martian Manhunter would be unable to pick up on them with their telepathic powers.²¹ The other Leaguers are ultimately as alarmed by this obsessive paranoia and secrecy as they were by the injuries his plans caused. As Wonder Woman states, “I cannot... I *will* not go into battle beside someone I do not trust. Someone who secretly studies me... scrutinizes my weaknesses as intently as he acknowledges my assets” (*JLA* #46, 20). The League narrowly votes to expel Batman, but they are crippled by continuing mutual distrust and recrimination for many issues afterwards. Batman rejoins the team and fences begin to mend by issue #55, but even after the acute crisis of trust is over, its repercussions reverberate for years, laying the groundwork for the failures of trust at the center of the “Identity Crisis” and “Crisis on Infinite Earths” storylines.

“Tower of Babel” came out in the fall of 2001, and I will close on some of the uncanny, insistent parallels between and Ras al Ghul’s assault on the Justice League and the events of 9/11, because both heralded a shift in how power management—as a popular fantasy of neoliberal governance and finance ontology—functioned as the dominant form of heroic power.

First, power management is a fantasy of risk management and preemptive action. Tracing Batman’s character arc from *Batman and the Outsiders* to *JLA*, I have shown how his capacity to analyze, anticipate, and preemptively counter threats came to

²¹ *JLA Secret Files* #3 features some vignettes in which Batman uses his emotional intimacy with his teammates to identify their weaknesses, as well as showing rippling effects of this breach of trust across the larger DCU.

dominate both his character and the whole enterprise of heroism in the DC universe. In “Tower of Babel,” Batman not only *failed* to anticipate this new threat to the League, but the very resources he himself developed were turned against them. In the same stroke, Ras Al Ghul’s scheme utterly discredited Batman, while totally validating his power management as the premier tools of power. While Batman would ultimately be reconciled with the rest of the League, and his style of heroism would remain influential, both retained the stain of this failure, a taint of bad faith and mistrust.

In a similar fashion, the attacks of 9/11 were a bracing shock to a culture surfing the heady winds of Empire. The technological simplicity and raw brutality of the attacks exposed the hollowness of the rhetoric of smooth, clean virtual war that persisted after the first Gulf War. They punctured as well the assertions of information dominance pushed by the US intelligence committee. Like the Justice League, the attack wounded America intimately, and left us paranoid and mistrustful—yet also angry at our intelligence services’ own secrecy contributed to the disaster. Indeed, once the acts were linked to Taliban, it became increasingly clear that the forces who attacked us were, to a great extent, irregular warfare assets the US itself had helped arm and train during the Cold War, now turned back upon us. At the same time, a wave of fiscal fiascos, from the bursting of the Dot Com Bubble to the Enron scandal, cracked the foundations of power management’s claims to omnipotence in the financial sector. The “smartest guys in the room” had not resolved the contradictions of capitalism and unlocked the secrets of unlimited growth, as they had claimed—the merely delayed crisis and so reaped a greater whirlwind of risk when it came. Across American culture, the manic sense of

omnipotence and unlimited possibility that defined the late 1990s—the faith that neoliberal technocracy could do anything, that Empire would traduce all barriers—was fatally wounded. History had not ended after all.

Yet these failures did not lead the political, military, and financial sectors to abandon power management fantasy and its discourses of risk management, preemption, and control. Instead, the language of power management came to define the War on Terror as an institutional project. Even after the trauma of 9/11—and of “Tower of Babel”—appeals to the power management model of affectively cool, masterful masculinity were central to the cultural capital exerted by technocratic experts in both war and finance. In the same way that *JLA* focused on Batman’s “smart” consciousness seems to obviate concerns about the ethics of his interventions into the crises of human society (and by extension, those of the League as a whole) by portraying it as the disciplined expression of a masculine hyper-rationality rather than as the funneling or sublimating of a compulsive sexualized rage, the US government used the rhetoric of “smart weapons” to abjure the specter of collateral damage, and “smart instruments” to obscure the creative destruction of the markets.²²

Just as the visceral memory of his failure remained after Batman was re-admitted to the League following “Tower of Babel,” 9/11’s interruption of the hubristic discourses of Imperial inevitability would haunt the power management discourses that structured both the Invasion of Iraq and the unregulated trade in financial instruments during the Bush years. Dazzled as we were by the awesome, futuristic spectacle of “shock and awe”

²² An aspect of RMA discourse we will return to in Chapter 5.

that demolished the paltry resistance offered by Iraq's conventional army during US military's second foray into the Middle East, the best efforts of media complicity and military jingoism could not suppress the memory of how fallible the informatized networks of American power had proved to be. Even as it took over the official discourses of power, power management's role as a fantasy for *individual* empowerment started to wane.

3.7 Conclusion

In *JLA*, Batman reached the apotheosis of his development as a power manager. For the length of Grant Morrison's run on the title (1997-2000), Batman became the defining standard for all superheroism, a new normative ideal that reshaped his teammates and the larger DC Universe as a whole. In so doing, he served as a popular fantasy that negotiated the neoliberalism's emergence into dominance within American culture as a whole. In Morrison's hands, Batman's financialized management was the only tool which could save democracy and unlock the unlimited potential in both the Justice League and mortal society as a whole—a faith that echoed the millennial claims of neoliberal technocracy in the Clinton/Blair era.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the disastrous results of America's military and economic hubris devastated the cultural capital of power management as a popular fantasy of power. As the spectacle of invasion sunk into the bloody morass of occupation, and the financial crisis tipped into the second great depression, the pop cultural authority of the power manager seemed to slip. Christopher Nolan's earthier,

dumber, meaner Batman took over as the most prominent version of the character,²³ and popular culture was flooded by a new crop of hard body heroes.

Yet just as power management began to lose ground in the discourses of science fiction and fantasy heroism during the War on Terror, it sprang up in another genre: the ostensible realism of television drama. If the path of Batman's development from *Batman and the Outsiders* to *JLA* traced power managements ascendance to become the hegemonic language of finance ontology—across business, war, media, and politics—AMC's television drama *Dexter* (2006-13) would re-articulate power management as a “diminished” strategy for securing a space of relative freedom within what Fisher called the “market Stalinism” of white collar office culture. In the next chapter, I explore what happens when power management fantasy is extended into the mundane struggles of everyday life.

²³ In Nolan's trilogy of Batman films, *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), the character is stripped of his connections to finance ontology and the logic of neoliberal governance, which were established in *Kingdom Come* and *JLA*. In these films, the character is a capitalist, but he no longer incarnates the *logic* of capital. All of Batman's gear in the films consists of patented products of Wayne Enterprises. In claiming them for his heroic project, Wayne acts as an owner of capital appropriating the products of his enterprise. But he doesn't *see himself* as a capital project that “entrepreneurializes itself at every turn as [...] human capital seeking to strengthen its competitive positioning [...] concerned with enhancing its portfolio value in all domains” (32-3). He's just an angry rich guy who does a lot of pushups and growls behind a mask. The emphasis on analysis, speculative prediction, and strategic preemption that defined *JLA* Batman is gone, replaced by the vulgar physicality and hot rage of the hard body hero. Similarly, *JLA*'s focus on global threats is replaced in Nolan's film with the squalid business of occupation. In all of these aspects, Nolan's films are a regression back to the 1980s and the hard body masculinity of *Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen*. The return to these Reagan-era tropes signals the larger cultural de-legitimization of Clinton-style technocratic governance.

Chapter Four
“I put up a front so the world won’t see how vulnerable I’m *not*”
Awkwardness, Sociopathy, and the
Power Management of Everyday Life in *Dexter*

As the previous chapters have shown, the trajectory of power management in the 20th century situated the power manager as an aspirational figure surfing neoliberal finance ontology’s emergence into dominance. *Dune*, *Justice League*, and *JLA* all turned their protagonists’ rigorously disciplined interiorities into spectacles of capitalist futurity: the self-as-a-capital-project is presented as a science fictional wonder; even more wondrous, really, because *in the context of* space travel or superpowers, the financialized consciousnesses of Paul Atreides and Bruce Wayne *seems* grounded in (capitalist) reality. As Michael Saler argues of Sherlock Holmes, part of power management’s appeal is that fans can emulate its spectacles of cognitive labor and effective labor (*As If* 110, 118). Consuming such narratives, we can playact at grafting this speculation-tech into our selves, extending the fun—and the implicit ideology—of these narratives deeper into our “real” lives.

JLA marks the crest of neoliberalism’s long period of emergence and ascension. With finance ontology firmly entrenched in common sense, and the false horizon of capitalist realism locking into place, the narrative of the power manager as neoliberal vanguard starts to lose coherence. As a result of this crisis—which corresponds to the larger crisis of futurity in contemporary capitalist imagination—the trajectory of 21st power management effectively splits in two. On one hand, spectacles of epic, world-shaking super-arbitrage in the tradition of *Dune* and *JLA* are increasingly staged within *pre-capitalist* settings. Neoliberal governance and managed-capital subjectivity renew

their aspirational aura of futurity in these narratives, in which dominate more “primitive” subjects are unable to compete with exceptionally anachronistic power managers. R Scott Bakker’s *Prince of Nothing* series (2003-6) establishes this new power management trajectory in the fantasy genre, but we can also read Guy Ritchie’s Sherlock Holmes films (2009, 2011) as performing such a move, because they retrofit the Great Detective with the language and skillset of 20th century power management.¹ Whether these anachronistic power management texts transplant their neoliberal avatars into the feudal worlds of fantasy, or simply to earlier stages of capitalism, they keep the aspirational fantasy of 20th century power management alive by deferring the destabilizing effects of neoliberalism’s becoming-hegemonic.

On the other hand, we increasingly encounter characters that cultivate power management’s abandoned interiority and instrumentalized affective literacies within the ostensible realism of the 21 century television drama, using their powers to manage the mundane struggles of life *within* the hegemony of neoliberalism and finance ontology. This move brings the formerly fantastical subjectivity even closer to audiences’ lived experience, showing how much further capitalist realism has extended its grasp. Yet television narratives are still forms of popular fantasy, a space for the public to think the pressures finance ontology puts on the subject.

¹ These films bring power management fantasy back to its roots in the financial turn of the 19th century. As I argue in the introduction, Holmes was a key antecedent to 20th century power management, but, like other early detectives, he was interested in tracing events *backwards* to their origins, rather than speculatively projecting them into the future. In contrast, Ritchie’s Holmes is defined by extrapolation, especially through first film’s fight choreography.

The remainder of this chapter will focus on this second branch, using *Dexter* (Showtime 2006-2013) as an exemplary case of such “diminished” power management.² Not only is *Dexter* an early and influential example of power management TV, but it also clearly illustrates the complex mix of resistance, recuperation, and subsumption at work in these texts. Surfacing in US television in 2006, as both the US War on Terror and the institutionalized power management rhetoric of the Revolution in Military Affairs were losing cultural legitimacy, *Dexter illustrates* the radically diminished scope of “heroic action” of 21st century TV power managers. Gone are the visions a single early-adopting power manager policing the world or ruling the universe. Instead, the sociopathic protagonists bring their special training in and affinity with finance, military, espionage, and/or criminal operations to bear on the mundane challenges of everyday life, and the largely individual stakes of pedestrian crime.

4.1 Power Management as Television Drama: A Brief Genealogy

The first examples of television power managers operating in an “ostensibly real” present were *Profit* (Fox 1996) and *The Pretender* (NBC 1996-2000). *Profit* follows the machinations of a sociopathic antihero, as he lies, blackmails, and murders his way up the corporate ladder of the Gracen & Gracen Corporation. A victim of extreme childhood abuse, Jimmy Stakowski spent most of his childhood confined to a cardboard box, with only a television for company. The box was marked with the Gracen & Gracen corporate label, and the boy latched onto it in singular desire: his life’s work would be to become

² In the manuscript version of this project, there will be a companion chapter on the first branch, focusing on how Bakker’s *The Darkness that Comes Before* established the transplantation of power management into fantasy, and its continuing influence in texts like Brian Staveley’s *Chronicle of the Unhewn Throne* series (2014-16).

President of Acquisitions at the company. He assumes the name Jim Profit and shapes himself to become the perfect corporate subject to reach this goal essentially arbitrary goal.

While the show shares its basic premise—a sociopath fits right into the corporate world—with Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991), its approach is almost diametrically opposed. Its protagonist, Patrick Bateman, is a highly stylized creature of consumption and conformity. He merely takes the conventional tastes around him—in fashion, in business, in pornography—and exaggerates them to their logical extremes. He does not have goals or even an identity beyond his drive for hyperbolic excess.³ In contrast, the deranged protagonist of *Profit* is characterized by his affective coolness and tightly focused desire. Jim Profit is an extreme example of the self as capital subject: every aspect of his personality rendered as means, cultivated to compete. This is particularly true of the pleasures that serve as the conventional ends for characters in business dramas. Profit accumulates wealth, and he makes sure to adorn himself with the expected accoutrements of executive privilege. But he remains sociopathically detached from this yuppie consumption. His tailored suits are costuming, and his well-appointed penthouse contains a secret room holding his *real home*, his old box, where he returns to sleep at the close of every episode. Similarly, while he accumulates power over others, and is ruthless in using that power to clear the path to his coveted position, but the power

³ Bateman’s excessive consumption is a perverse caricature of the culture of “winning” among financial traders documented by Karen Ho in *Liquidated*, and by Robert Wosnitzer, and Edward LiPuma in their contributions to *The Wealth of Societies*. As LiPuma argues, though, for such traders, the conspicuous *consumption* which Bateman hyperbolizes is a secondary effect: “what defines those at the pinnacle of derivatives trading is that they [...] so deeply valorize their *acts of acquiring* money that money, once acquired, diminishes in value inasmuch as it can only be exchanged for the things that money can buy” (44, orig emphasis).

is not an end in itself—he is not excited by the power itself, as many characters in corporate dramas clearly are. Finally, he cultivates his appearance so that he can use sex and romance to further his goals, but seems to feel no desire of his own—in particularly stark contrast to *American Psycho*'s Bateman. Rather than revel in the pleasures of white collar privilege, Profit turns them into weapons, to better control the executives who crave them.

In his singular, pathological focus on climbing the corporate ladder to this arbitrary goal, then, Profit throws the structures of desire that animated the 1990s corporate drama into sharp relief. While novels like *American Psycho* and films such as *Wall Street* (Stone 1988), *Working Girl* (Nichols 1988), *Glengarry Glenross* (Foley 1992), *Swimming with Sharks* (Huang 1994), and *Disclosure* (Levinson 1994) explore neoliberalism's impact on the character of the capitalist *class*, *Profit* contrasts its cast of squabbling capitalists with an incarnation of neoliberal *capital itself*. Jim Profit's many fourth-wall breaking asides to the audience, then, offer a sardonic commentary not on the way that the public discourse about corporate life *accurately expresses* the shifting logics of capital, but rather on the ways that those dramas attempt to humanize capital's alien drives, to make corporate life about anything but the relentless logic of accumulation-in-itself. By orienting itself around Jim Profit's cold, alien perspective, *Profit* shows capital's ultimate indifference to human meaning.

American audiences were not receptive to *Profit*. Despite good reviews from critics, ratings were very low, and the series was cancelled mid-season. In the 2000s, many of the challenging elements that *Profit* pioneered would resurface in the emerging

“Golden Age” of prestige television, including the its anti-heroic protagonist in *Sopranos*(HBO 1999-2007) and *Breaking Bad* (AMC 2008-2013); its sardonic estrangement of genre conventions in *The Shield* (FX 2002-8) and *Desperate Housewives* (ABC 2004-12); and its incisive, noirish approach to voice-over narration—which undercuts and ironizes the action rather than summarizing and sentimentally affirming it—would be widely emulated, by *Desperate Housewives* in particular. Not until *Dexter*, though, would a show recombine all three elements to such estranging, engaging effect.

The other important precursor to 21st century power management television is *The Pretender*. Where *Profit* offered cracked gothic interpretation of the office drama, *The Pretender* operated as an action-thriller in the tradition of *The Equalizer* (CBS 1985-89). This allows it to stay closer to the science fictional and superheroic associations of 20th century power management, while moving into the heightened but *ostensibly* “normal” reality of the TV thriller. The protagonist, Jarrod, is a “pretender,” a sociopath trained from childhood to perform the speculative cognitive labor of “simulation” in support of military and corporate black ops. But he escapes the shadowy Centre that created him and becomes a fugitive, employing his skills on behalf of everyday folks. In an odd amalgam of *Born Identity* (Liman 2002) and *Quantum Leap* (NBC 1989-1993), each episode shows Jarrod slipping into a new identity, and using his power management toolbox to lie, steal, and sometimes kill in order to manipulate those around him, in order to uncover and avenge hidden murders. His personal quest to right hidden wrongs is dogged by his

former handlers, who try to recapture him as a rogue asset.⁴ In contrast to Jim Profit, Jarrod's *goals* are pro-social—he really wants to help people, even though he cannot understand or connect with them. Unlike the unrepentant Profit, Jarrod respects and even envies the emotions of “regular” people. This desire to become a “real boy” is central to *The Pretender's* lighter and less morally ambiguous tone, which helps explain why it survived four seasons.⁵ While the show emphasizes his isolated and controlled childhood, it does so as a source of connection to the audience rather than as estrangement from it. While Jarrod can be cold and ruthless in his pursuit of justice, and he clearly revels in the manipulative toolset of affective power management, his machinations are often figured as playful, and each episode Jarrod “discovers” some mundane childish pleasure (from ice-cream to Oreos to Santa), humanizing him for the audience. As importantly, Jarrod spends a lot of time investigating the evil Centre and its motives, which serves to separate his character further from the corporate and military logics that empowered him in the audience's mind. Despite the nasty things he can—and does—do in his quest for justice, he is presented a sympathetic individual distinct from the embodiment of institutional power management.

⁴ Jarrod's backstory—of an experimental subject who escapes and must escape capture by and/or feud with his creators—is certainly not an original sf premise, but *The Pretender* does provide a precedent for how this scenario can work in episodic television. We can see its influence in *La Femme Nikita* (CTV/USA 1997-2000) and *Dark Angel* (Fox 2000-2). But these shows, while interesting in their gender representation, largely confine their action to the shadow world of espionage, lacking the emphasis on “regular folks” that marks the pretender and the unconventional consultant genre it spawns.

⁵ This Pinocchio metaphor, used extensively in both *The Pretender* and *Dexter*, is interesting not only because it reinforces the linkage between sociopathy and childhood in both shows, but because of the way it also links them to the sf trope of androids and automatons like *Star Trek: The Next Generation's* Data, whose quest to become more human-like is also frequently figured this way.

The Pretender was important to the development of the TV subgenre that features most 21st century power managers, including *Dexter*. Jarod’s character arc—in which an asset developed for essentially anti-social espionage and financial applications is repurposed to confronting mundane struggles for everyday justice—prepared the ground for the 2000s phenomenon of “unconventional expert consultant” procedurals.⁶ In this subgenre, a white male character defined by his speculative cognitive labor is drawn into pro-social investigative or police activities, employing the toolset of power management in within the “ostensible realism” of a contemporary urban setting, often in odd-couple pairings with a “straight man” partner.⁷ Key examples include *Dexter*, *Psych* (USA 2006-14), *Chuck* (USA 2007-12), *The Mentalist* (CBS 2008-13), *Burn Notice* (USA 2008-13), *Lie to Me* (USA 2009-11), and *White Collar* (Fox 2009-14).⁸ Following the pattern established in *The Pretender*, much of the frisson of these shows comes from seeing human capital, developed for use by elite corporate and military institutions, being redirected to directly benefit the public.⁹

⁶ The other key progenitor of this subgenre is *Monk* (USA 2002-9), which proved there was an audience for consulting detective narratives, and for “consultants with problems.” But *Monk* is neurotic rather than psycho- or sociopathic, and as a former policeman he isn’t bringing “outside” expertise into his investigations.

⁷ The emphasis on the cognitive labor of analysis, speculation, and affective manipulation in the 21st century expert consultant subgenre distinguishes it from the 20th century tradition of “rogue expert in violence” shows, from *Man in a Suitcase* (ITV 1967-8) through *The A-Team* (NBC 1983-7), *The Equalizer* (CBS 1985-89), or even *Highlander: The Series* (CBS 1992-8). Following the patterns established in *Dune*, in the white collar procedural, the capacity for violence remains an important element, but it is firmly subsumed and rearticulated within the framework of cognitive capital and financial speculation.

⁸ While the trope of the “consulting detective” goes back to Conan Doyle, it is important to note that both modern TV versions of the Holmes character, *Sherlock* (BBC 2010-) and *Elementary* (CBS 2012-), appeared after the viability of this format had been established by shows like *Monk*, *Dexter*, and *Psych*.

⁹ Against the populist thrill of this petty redistribution, though, the fact remains that in the shows which lean hardest on this narrative, from *The Pretender* through *Chuck* and *Burn Notice*, these rogue operatives,

Dexter combines elements of *The Pretender* and *Profit* to create an uncanny protagonist who is more appealing than either while being just as disturbing. Like Jarrod, Dexter can be disarmingly childlike, his wholehearted enjoyment of simple pleasures clashing with his violent proclivities. Like Jim Profit, Dexter is framed as a monster not only by the series but through his own narration. Like Profit's obsessive and perverse corporate maneuvering, Dexter's pursuit of justice—both official and vigilante—is estranged because it is turned to idiosyncratic ends. *Dexter* goes further, though. While *Profit* makes a spectacle of its protagonist's sociopathy, Jim is not set up as an object of audience identification: his perspective remains as distant from the audience as he is from the rest of human community. In contrast, Dexter's "inhuman" coldness, emotional distance, and (relative) desire-less-ness are figured as key sources of pleasure and engagement in *Dexter*, often subverting or superseding the conventional audience rewards of the procedural drama. Watching Dexter escape affective ensnarement by both office politics and interpersonal trauma is often more engaging than either the intellectual mystery of the episode's featured "case," or the recuperative spectacle of justice being served to that case's perp at the episode's conclusion. This applies both to the department's official police work, and to Dexter's recreational poaching.

This cultivation of audience identification helps explain why, while, *Dexter's* first season remains the "coldest" example power management affect in 21st century television, it also follows *The Pretender* in progressively humanizing its sociopathic protagonist. Indeed, few of expert consultant procedurals that follow *Dexter* manage to

while powerful compared to normal citizens, are largely overmatched by the institutions they pilfer their skills from, reinforcing the reflexive impotence of capitalist realism.

start from, let alone sustain, the “cold” sociopathic affect which comes from rigorously managing the self as a capital project in the style of Paul Atreides and Batman. Their protagonists tend to fall into the “hot” affects of the hustler hero, whose manipulateness and instrumentality are merely in tension with their desire for real connections to others (*Psych*, *Burn Notice*, *The Mentalist*, *White Collar*), or the equally “hot” narcissistic drama of the tortured genius (*House*, *Sherlock*, *Lie to Me*). Healing the power manager’s broken social connections and re-incorporating him into normative relationships is a major theme of all these shows—even if such sentimental resolution is indefinitely deferred.

This trend towards humanizing the sociopath, combined with the emergence of “quirky autism” as a trope in TV writing,¹⁰ results in the dissolution of power management as a specific conjunction of cognitive-affective skillset, flat affect, and neoliberal subjectivity. By the election of Barack Obama in 2008, all three elements had spread throughout popular culture, even as the power manager, as a specific character type, disappears from view. Asked “who is a neoliberal today” in 2018, Wendy Brown inverts the question, to ask “who is *not* a neoliberal today?” (Brown 2018). In a popular culture where flat-affected schemers abound and ruthless management of human capital has become utterly unremarkable, I could ask, who is *not* implicated in the subjectivity of the power manager?

¹⁰ As public awareness of Autism Spectrum disorders such as Asperger’s grew in the 2000s, many of the attributes of the power manager have started to be associated with awkwardness and incomprehension rather than sociopathic ruthlessness. The character of Temperance Brennan on the forensic procedural *Bones* (Fox 2005-17) is an early and influential (if inconsistent) example of such a hybrid character. While the increasing representation of such characters can have positive implications for neuro-diverse folks, in the context of this chapter I would argue that the fact that a reductive caricature of “the spectrum” has become a stock type for “quirky” flat-affected cognitive adepts in contemporary TV writing shows how normalized and no-longer-threatening the instrumentalizing logic of capital subjectivity has become. For an example of the critique of autism *as a trope* from within the community, see Potts 2014. For a more detailed study of connections between the discourse of autism and neoliberalism, see Ante-Contreras 2017.

Dexter is the threshold point at which the figure of the power management, which crystalized the emergence of neoliberalism in *Dune*, and solidified the becoming-dominant of its finance ontology in *JLA*, finally melts back into air. In *Dexter*'s first season we can see its representation of neoliberal subjectivity teeter between estrangement and identification, before settling into the trajectory of normalization. In the rest of this chapter, I will examine how three key aspects of neoliberalism's hegemony in American culture and the popular imagination are expressed in *Dexter*'s slow disentangling of the power manager across its first season.

4.2 Surface Tensions

The opening shot of *Dexter*'s second episode shows him floating serenely in a peaceful lagoon, the frame partially submerged so that we can see both his face above the



Fig 1: Floating

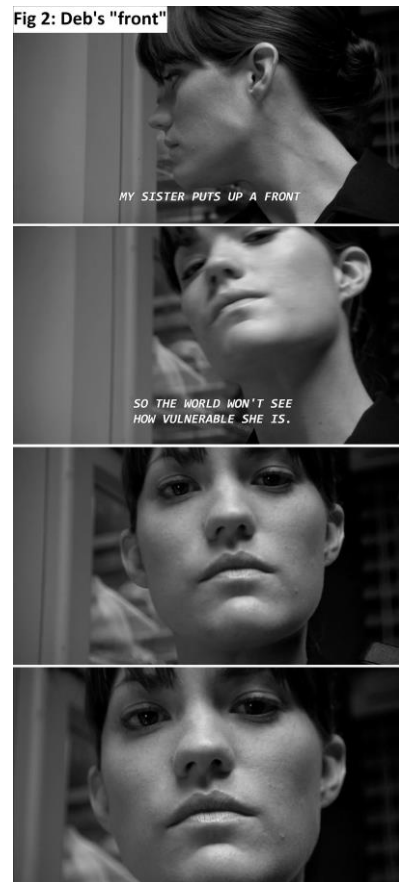
surface, and his body beneath (**fig 1**). After a few seconds in which the only sounds are bird calls and the lapping of the water, Dexter's voice-over comes in, pensive and languid: "I dream. I dream I'm floating on the surface of my own life. Watching it unfold, observing it. I'm the outsider, looking in" (S1E02 4:00-4:40). While Dexter's moment of calm is soon shattered by rowdy teens on power skis, this moment provides the interpretive key for the series, and as well as a concise summation of the way that it departs from the core assumptions of 20th century power management.

While 20th Century power management, from *Dune* to *JLA*, was interested in *reading* and *producing* surfaces, its real focus was always on the hidden *depths*. Surfaces were only symptoms generated at a deeper level by complex systems to which the power manager gained privileged access through his spectacular cognitive labor. This model of depth operates from the individual subject up through the totality of society. The power manager must plumb the depths of his own subjectivity, in order to discipline and shape it as a capital project. Mastering others means decoding their unique psychology and the deep structure of their connections within social and material environments. Mastering those environments involves mapping the subterranean networks that bind their constituent elements together. Identity, agency, meaning, power: all are found through the cognitive labor of *seeing through* the surface.

Formally and narratively, *Dexter* is obsessed with the surface level itself: when, why, and how surface images are projected; by whom or by what; how different projected surfaces overlap and interact; what they cover and what they fail to cover. Further, *Dexter* consistently highlights its audience's position as "the outsider looking in" on the narrative, connecting their viewing experience to Dexter's understanding of social life as a playing out on a surface little different than the cinematic frame. Yet, as in **fig 1**, the audience is also given access to what lies beneath that extends beyond any diegetic perspective, even Dexter's. Thus, *Dexter* foregrounds not only the ways people are deceived by surface appearances, but also the processes that lead people, individually and collectively, to *choose* not to look beyond the surfaces others project.

A conversation between Dexter and his sister Deb later in Episode 2 offers a prototypical example of the way *Dexter* frames the audience's gaze to foreground the relations between social performance, social identity, and power relations. This sequence constructs a complex position for the audience, because, within the shot, it is invited to share in multiple layered but distinct points of view, each representing a subject position with different stakes in acknowledging the transparency of the "front" Deb is attempting to project.

In this scene, Dexter and Deb are in his forensic lab, discussing the mutilation of a victim by the Ice Truck Killer, the serial killer who serves as Dexter's rival and homoerotic *frère fatale* in the first season. Most of this conversation is conveyed in a conventional close-up shot-reverse-shot, conveying the emotional closeness one would expect of siblings (**fig 2**). Because of her experience on the Vice Squad, Deb empathizes with the sex workers the killer is targeting. Deb struggles to contain her emotions and project a properly masculine "professional" affect. When she turns away for a moment to compose herself, the camera pulls into an extreme close-up, scrutinizing first her anguish, and then the carefully controlled facade behind which she tries to hide it.



Dexter, in his voice-over narration, marvels at the “front” she puts up “so the world won’t see how vulnerable she is” (**fig 2**). With our attention so closely focused, the audience *cannot help but see* both that the “front” *and* the vulnerability it is meant to hide. The camera lingers for seven seconds on Deb’s turned face, shown in the first frame of **fig 2**, long enough for the viewer to note the muscle standing out on her clenched jaw, the throbbing pulse and prominent vein on her neck, the movement of her Adam’s apple as she swallows her rage. All these telling features are suppressed as she turns back to face the camera, presenting a carefully smoothed mask to the scrutiny of the camera’s zooming gaze. Such details are right there on the surface of the shot. While the camera invites the reader to perform the cognitive labor of “reading” Deb’s expression, then, that labor is not difficult; this is not a great or deep a mystery.

Compare *Dexter*’s framing of this scene with the way *Dune* figures the same kind of labor as spectacle, as in the scene where Jessica “read the more obvious signs in Mapes’s actions and appearance, the petit betrayals” revealed by the Bene Gesserit’s “deep training of alertness that exposed meaning in the most casual muscle twitch” (53, 55). It takes no such deep training to “expose” the meaning of Deb’s expression; most viewers will do so reflexively. While scenes like this foreground the labor of perception that registers the tension between the surface and what it (barely) covers, then, they also show that the perceptive and productive affective labor that *Dune* figured as rare and spectacular have become ubiquitous and mundane.

While we seem to share Dexter’s eye-line in this scene, the ease we share with him in penetrating Deb’s “front” implies that his perceptive abilities (as well as ours) are

superior to those of “the world” that forms the intended audience for Deb’s performance. Who or what is included in this “world,” and what must be concealed from it? Here it is key to note that Deb and Dexter are not simply siblings but co-workers,¹¹ and the emotions that Deb is hiding are her emotions *about the subject of her work*. “The world,” then, is implicitly the masculine professional norms of law enforcement, and Deb hides the ways that her subjectivity exceeds or departs from those norms. She pretends not to care too much, to feel too much, to view the evidence they are discussing as a collection of interesting technical details rather than markers of human tragedy. Deb’s “front,” then, imitates the emptiness and objectivity of the white, white-collar, male subject position.

The irony, of course, is that Dexter is also putting up a front, but his front hides the fact that his emptiness *is not* just a performance of professionalism. The sequence makes this connection explicit by cutting from its close-up scrutiny of Deb’s “front” to an equally close shot of Dexter’s (**fig 3**). He makes, then breaks eye-contact with



the audience, musing “me, I put up a front so the world won’t see how vulnerable I’m not” (13). Dexter’s affective performances may have different stakes than those of the other characters, but he shares with Deb and every other character the experience of performing constantly, not so much for any particular auditor as for a disembodied regulatory gaze, what Mark Fisher, drawing on Žižek, calls the bureaucratic “big Other” of neoliberal capitalism (*Capitalist Realism* 44-52). The big Other, Fisher argues, arises

¹¹ As Deb and Dexter’s family dynamic is dominated by their memory of their father, whose defined himself through his labor as policemen, this distinction isn’t strong at the best of times...

from the intensive surveillance and affective manipulation the mark contemporary management, and the proliferation of auditing and “accountability” regimes. The result is a “virtual subject” whose panoptic gaze must always be accounted for. Yet, Fisher argues, the most important aspect of the big Other is its “constitutive ignorance.” It is “the consumer of PR and propaganda, the virtual figure which is required to believe even when no individual can” (Fisher 44). The big Other demands an inauthentic performance, but it also accepts such performances uncritically; the quality of performance is less important than the demonstration that one is willing to perform at all.

In the bookending narration at the close of episode two, Dexter states that “there are no secrets in life, just hidden truths that lie beneath the surface.” *Dexter* thus trains the viewer to play the “the world,” the big Other, and play auditor to the big Other simultaneously; to see the “hidden truths” that world is “deemed not to know [...] wasn’t allowed to know” (Fisher 45). Just as Fisher argues that the social world is generated by the interplay between “what the big Other knows, i.e. what is officially accepted, and what is widely known and experienced by actual individuals” (45), so *Dexter*, through its writing, design, and cinematography, keeps the audience focused on the way that “fronts,” like those Deb and Dexter put up here, are woven into a tissue of fragile surfaces, sustained against “the world” by ad-hoc agreements *not* to look too carefully at each other’s performances. Feigning inattention to the gaps in others’ performances becomes a form of empathy, a form of solidarity against the big Other’s managerial gaze.

Yet *Dexter* also foregrounds how awkward and stressful maintaining these fronts is for normal folks. In the sequence in **fig 2**, the audience is invited, not simply to observe

and audit Deb’s performance, but to empathize with both her “inappropriate” feelings *and* the uncomfortable struggle to mask those feelings. While the shots in **fig 2** and **fig 3** can be matched up with Dexter’s and Deb’s point-of-view shots, respectively, the audience is also offered such a penetrating gaze independent of any diegetic gaze. A good example is a lingering close-up of Detective Angel Batiste from episode two (**fig 4**). As in **fig 2**, this shot has two



Fig 4: Angel's "front"

purposes. The first is narrative: it lets us know that behind the cheerful amity of his professional performance, Angel is having a rough time—inviting the viewer to query the source of that sorrow. The second purpose, though, is precisely to evoke the empathy of the viewer, to generate a feeling of sympathetic awkwardness when Angel struggles to put his professional mask back on.

Within this context of pervasive surveillance and contagious awkwardness, what makes Dexter unique, what places him in the trajectory of power management as a fantasy of empowerment—however diminished—is that, like Paul, Dexter has “a strong sense of the sardonic” which “uncouples him from belief in his own pretensions” (*Dune* 126). In the office culture of the Miami PD, the “proliferation of auditing culture within postfordism” Fisher identifies is on full display, as the detectives are constantly pushed to promote themselves, to perform professionalism in specifically classed and gendered ways to please the spoken and unspoken metrics of their supervisors and the public. The pressure to produce such performances while “staying true” to either their personal ideals

or their actual lived experience weighs heavily on every character but Dexter. In this context it is not surprising that, despite the whinging, put-upon tone of his voiceovers, the show as a whole conveys a deep envy of the serene indifference with which Dexter tells his coworkers and superiors whatever they want to hear, the effortless manner in which he navigates the petty politics, bureaucratic shenanigans, and subtle micro-aggressions of his workplace. What makes *Dexter* interesting in this reading, then, what makes him compelling as a protagonist, is not the violence of his *private* desires, but rather his apparent lack of a need for a genuine, authentic *public* affect.

Further, Dexter is also immune to the contagious, social quality of awkwardness. As Adam Kotsko argues, awkwardness “moves through the social network, it *spreads*. You can’t observe an awkward situation without being drawn in: you are made to feel awkward as well” (8). But Dexter is not drawn in. He observes awkwardness’s effects on the social networks around him, but is not touched by it himself. The many uncomfortably close shots in *Dexter*, like **fig 2** and **fig 4**, not only function to draw us into that awkward sympathy, but also beg the question of how much easier life would be if, like Dexter, we did not have to feel this way.

Dexter’s twin freedoms, from the desire to express an authentic self in his public performances and from the contagion of sympathy, allow him to apply a purely rational approach to his interactions. In the tradition of power management, he is able to pursue social relationships instrumentally, as investments to be managed for rates of return. But just as the social world in *Dexter* is not a deep system but rather an ad-hoc bricolage of surfaces, so too are Dexter’s own performances. *Dune* is a fantasy of perfect competence,

in which Paul's every word and movement are batch-produced precisely to match the exigencies of the moment. Dexter tends to generate his performances from a limited set of basic scripts, but virtuosity is rarely required, because his genius mostly lies in hiding where others have, for both selfish and altruistic reasons, tacitly conspired not to look.

Dexter, then, draws in the viewer through a triple hail: as the regulatory gaze of "the world," the big Other, from which each character seeks to conceal parts of themselves; as an empathetic "human" individual, who cannot help but sympathize with them in both their failures and their success; and as the neoliberal subject who, following Dexter's example, looks past that empathy and sees opportunity in the gaps.

4.3 *Dexter*, Derivatives, and the Power Management of Awkwardness

The remainder of this chapter examines how the shift from the deep complexity and spectacular performativity of 20th century power management towards the management of surface images in *Dexter* expresses three changes in 21st century society, each tied to neoliberalism's becoming-hegemonic. These inter-related cultural shifts roughly coincided with the crisis of 9/11 and George W. Bush's first term in office:

1. Neoliberalism increasingly discards the rhetorical cloak of novelty and innovation it wore under Clinton's "New Democrats," consolidating its gains and settling in as the new "business as usual." In the process, much of the language and imagery central to 20th century power management is transposed from fantasies of *individual* power to become the official discourse of *institutional* power, enforced by the gaze of the big Other.

2. There is a shift within the professional discourses of finance ontology, away from the *function* of arbitrage towards the *form* of the derivative contract as the organizing cognitive metaphor for the logic of finance. At the same time, finance capital's grandiose claims to *master* deep structures of complexity shift towards humbler and more technically accurate claims to *reduce* complex systems to manageable images.

3. The cultural politics of irony that defined the 1990s gives way to a yawning ontological crisis of awkwardness. Ironic cultural production derives meaning from its deviation from waning but still commonly acknowledged social norms—a kind of affective Bretton Woods in which the “gold standard” of “traditional values” anchors the valuation of competing countercultural modes of belief and expression. Once the fragmentation of this “mainstream” reaches a critical point—as Kotsko argues it does in the wake of 9/11—the meaning or “value” of cultural expressions must be continuously re-measured within an increasingly volatile field of competing value systems whose relative authority “floats” within the mediated marketplace of ideas. Dexter’s sardonic remove insulates him from contagious empathy with the awkwardness around him.

I will examine how each of these factors contributes to Dexter’s “diminished” power management, with particular attention to the way that *Dexter* exposes the whiteness and maleness that has always been implicit in the aspirational version of power management we saw in chapters 2 and 3. The skills of power management are still used to maneuver for advantage in interpersonal situations, but the goal is increasingly the maintenance of the individual’s relative privilege in socially and economically turbulent times. Because individual privilege is always connected to hierarchies of race and gender, most of the spectacular affective maneuvering in contemporary power management drama involves the protagonists leveraging their access to the scripts of whiteness and heteronormativity—even if they disavow those scripts or deploy them in service of deviant structures of desire.¹²

Dexter thus engages with the racial aspects of power management much more directly and extensively than *Dune* or *JLA*—offering many examples of the ways that 21st century power management fantasy necessitates the maintenance of a hegemonic

¹² In the next chapter I will explore the radical potential of queering the structures of desire. But most 21st century power management texts settle for desublimated, deviant pleasures which pose no ultimate challenge to either the neoliberal or heteromasculine status quo.

whiteness, which is both demystified as an unnatural cultural construct *and* elevated as an unparalleled source of social power within an increasingly multicultural urban society. As Ewan Kirkland argues, “*Dexter* throws [such] whiteness into relief—contrasting it with other ethnicities, sardonically reflecting on its invisibility, revealing its visual constructedness” (200). While *Dexter*’s inner monologue highlights the essential arbitrariness of the cultural markers of gender, race, class, and sexuality he weaves into his instrumentalized social performances—demonstrating that *he* does not identify with them—it remains the case that ensuring that *others* identify him with these traits is central to maintaining his advantageous position. To return to Kotsko’s definition of the structuring fantasy of the TV sociopath, *secretly* “not giving a fuck” about social conventions give him a sardonic distance from them that helps *Dexter* remain “powerful and free” (Kotsko 2010, 4)—but only so long as he continues to perform *as if he did care* in public, as if maleness and whiteness *are* coextensive with power.

Dexter’s attention to the interplay of racial performative codes in the cosmopolitan office space serves to highlight the continuing social power of Whiteness amid the destabilized social milieu of Kotsko’s “radical awkwardness,” but like *Dexter* himself, the series shows little interest in imagining alternatives to the inequalities of capitalist realism.

4.4 From Brave New World to Business as Usual

The power management stories of the 20th century are all fantasies of early adoption, where use of the financial logics of arbitrage and flexible capital management gives situational power over those still operating under the outmoded assumptions of

industrial production, Fordist accumulation, and liberal democracy. Paul's ascent to power in *Dune* is the paradigmatic case: an *individual* exemplifying the logic of speculation turns the tables on a sociopolitical *system* defined by the logic of extractive capitalism. In the 1980s and 90s, this aspirational subjectivity was linked to new styles of neoliberal management. *Justice League's* Maxwell Lord is able to challenge Batman's authority over the most powerful team in the world by applying the affective techniques of the "new management" that championed decentralized authority and corporatized "teamwork" (Sennett 55-7, 108-17). In *JLA*, Batman's authority over the rest of the team operates on the model of the management consultant—a figure of awe and dread in the age of downsizing.¹³

Yet *JLA* signals a crucial shift in this trajectory because Batman's power management is not only dominant, but becomes hegemonic. The norms of superheroism shift to reflect Batman's own program of neoliberal governance, and power management becomes the standard, rather than the exception. Even as Morrison and Porter marked its cultural triumph in *JLA*, neoliberal governance and flexibility were losing their patina of novelty and settling into being the norm in business, politics, and war.

4.4.1 Negotiating Office Spaces

Published in the midst of Morrison and Porter's run on *JLA*, Richard Sennett's 1998 book *The Corrosion of Character* sought not only to diagnose the ways that "the new capitalism is an often illegible regime of power" to those living within it, but to *demystify* the ways that neoliberal economics claimed to offer subjects "more freedom to

¹³ The term "downsize" as a euphemism for layoffs originated in 1986 with the collapse of the auto industry, becoming ubiquitous in the 1990s.

shape their lives [while] in fact, the new order substitutes new controls rather than simply abolishing the rules of the past” (10). At this time, scholars like Richard Sennett thought the aura of novelty and aspiration was still important enough to neoliberalism’s claims on social power that they were worth debunking.

While academic work like Sennett’s struggles against neoliberalism’s beneficent claims for the hearts and minds of academic and policy-making elites in the late 1990s, cultural production of the time shows that it had already lost its “ground truth” in the daily experience of workplace relations. In 1999 a veritable sub-genre

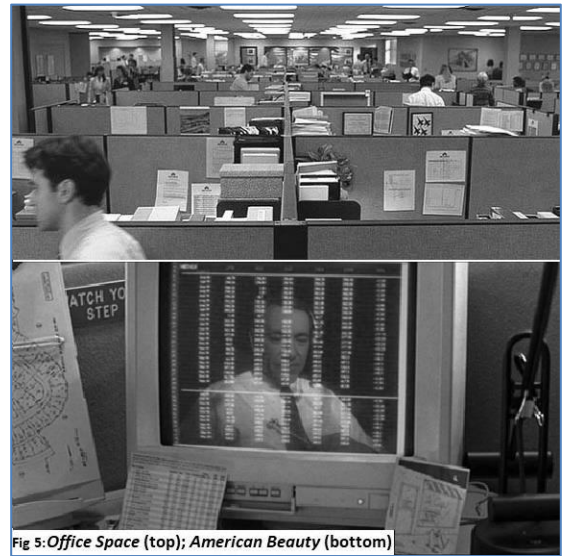


Fig 5: *Office Space* (top); *American Beauty* (bottom)

appeared—the office escape film—which damned the new management style of “flexible capitalism” in much the same terms that Sennett’s book did. *American Beauty* (Mendes 1999), *Fight Club* (Fincher 1999), and *Office Space* (Judge 1999) all demystify neoliberalism’s function as an aspirational discourse, an ideal for self-management and upward mobility.¹⁴ Far from offering a path of liberation and empowerment for the white-collar workers in these films, the language of flexibility and “working smart” merely re-

¹⁴ These films all revolve around the difficulty of imagining a middle-class white heteronormative identity *either* grounded in, *or* separate from white collar labor. Such labor, devalued, deskilled, and increasingly contingent in late capitalism, has lost its “meaning” as a class marker. Of course, this experience was always-already lost, as any overview of American literature and cultural theory in the 20th century would reveal. *American Beauty* is just Heller’s *Something Happened* served up with sublime cinematography and a side of sentimentality. What is new in neoliberalism is that, while white collar work has become more meaningless, it has also become more difficult to disidentify with and escape from because of the official adoption of power management’s affective manipulateness as corporate managerial policy.

inscribes their existing sense of subordination to a pointless and inefficient structure. The terminology of flexibility and systemic analysis was increasingly adopted as the language of what Mark Fisher calls market Stalinism.

In these films power management is not a means to personal empowerment, but rather has become the form of institutional power *against which* the hero must struggle. The protagonists are defined not



Fig 6: Managerial Cajoling in Office Space

by their mastery over power management techniques, but by their principled disgust with its affective manipulations, and their efforts to evade its cajoling and achieve a masculine authenticity untainted by its demands (fig 6).

Viewed in the context of this popular subgenre of white-collar rebellion, the innovative move that *Dexter* makes is to figure the sociopathic fantasy of power management as a counter-hegemonic force. In *Dexter*, embracing power management is still a path towards personal liberation and power, because it affords the only subject position that can escape regulation by institutional power management without necessitating the abandonment of the white collar office space itself. Dexter's embrace of individual power management allows him to create a tenuous but real space of unmanaged, unregulated freedom of action *within* the office. In *American Beauty*, *Fight Club*, and *Office Space*, male protagonists' liberation from cubicle life severs their connection to white collar identity, destabilizing their social claims to adult masculinity and heteronormative whiteness—effectively throwing them back into the dubious coding

of adolescence (**fig 7**). In contrast, Dexter escapes management by his superiors, but maintains his access to the codes of office culture and the material and social resources it provides—both of which he can divert to fuel his personal project of



deviant fulfillment. One of the pleasures *Dexter* provides, then, is the spectacle of a worker conspiring to create the conditions of *unalienated labor* within a white collar environment that is acknowledged as *inherently alienating*.—even if the protagonist must become alienated from the rest of *human* relations to achieve it (**fig 8**).

The factors of race and gender come into play because, as a white man, Dexter's cynical performances can so easily “pass.” He is psychically liberated from the system while still enjoying a privileged place within it. He is able to make space for his illicit private desires, and the deviant masculinity they represent, precisely because in “passing” he becomes unmarked, invisible.



In contrast, everyone else in *Dexter* struggles *visibly* to claim the tokens of professional normality, and to craft a performance of white collar identity that includes their racial and ethnic identities as well. Because they are woman and people of color, they cannot simply disappear into their professional roles, as Dexter can. Race, gender,

and ethnicity always remain as an excess of meaning that must be managed, an overflow that threatens to destabilize their white-collar personas. Their professional status must be continuously, and visibly, claimed and reclaimed. They experience the gap between their normative performance of “professional” and their “authentic” self as a double crisis: as both a betrayal of their “true” gendered/raced/ethnic self *and* as a threat to their sense of *passing* as a middle-class citizen. From both perspectives, the performance is both a lie and a failure.¹⁵ This is particularly clear for Deb, Angel, and LaGuerta.

Deb’s character arc in the first season revolves around her move up in the class structure within the policing profession. Deb craves the validation of being admitted to the white-collar environment of the homicide unit, but the distance it creates between her experience of law enforcement work and her father’s (usually pictured in uniform and associated with street policing) is a source of tension for her. Further, while the move out of *Vice* means that she is no longer directly associated with the sex workers she monitored, Deb finds that she cannot escape her femininity. Despite the scripts of working class masculinity *and* the middle-class business casual attire that she layers on top of her gender, she remains awkwardly positioned as the femmest tomboy.

Angel is deeply invested in projecting a performance of self that balances his professional status, his Latino identity, and his heteronormative masculinity. We can see

¹⁵ The Miami Homicide Unit is itself a fraught stage for performances of class. While law enforcement generally has working class connotations, the homicide unit is the most white collar echelon of the profession. The detectives must know when to code-switch between class idioms and performances. The office rather than the car is the primary site of labor, and while the detectives are still linked to the use of force—and the threat of bodily harm to themselves—that goes with street enforcement, they are more strongly aligned with the cognitive labor of detection. The dress code—and the performative scripts that go with it—are business casual. Those whose performances recall the rougher, working class aspects of the street—Deb, Doakes, and later Quinn—have particular difficulty fitting into this business casual world.

this continuous effort in the way he code-switches between English and Spanish in conversation with Dexter as well as the Latina Lieutenant LaGuerta, and the way that he sprinkles sexualized macho banter into his discussion of evidence with Dexter and Vince. Yet, as season one progresses, each aspect of Angel's identity comes into crisis, and his attempts to cover the resulting chasms with paper-thin deceptions generate the sense of contagious awkwardness that Kotsko identifies. Angel's awkward domestic mummery is a key contrast to Dexter's sardonic performances of heteronormativity, which create a domestic stability Angel is deeply envious of. Dexter's detachment from this social-affective contagiousness of Angel's slow motion breakdown is abundantly demonstrated when he stumbles onto the secret of Angel's marital trouble and, seeing no advantage to be acknowledging it, never brings it up again.

As a Cuban-American woman in charge of the department, Lieutenant Maria LaGuerta must deal with issues similar to both Angel and Deb. Yet unlike Deb and Angel, who try to balance their performances of professionalism with some "authentic" expressions of their identity, LaGuerta is portrayed as willing to instrumentalize her relationships and the social images she creates. Like a good neoliberal subject, she seeks to convert her performance of selfhood into a brand. But as a brown woman, her attempts to pursue similar strategies to Dexter's have very different results, both dietetically and in terms of audience acceptance. Within the narrative, her options for self-branding are limited because she cannot escape the labels her embodiment entails. Her political maneuvering ultimately backfires because when she needs solidarity from another Latina woman in the face of systemic inequality, she instead finds herself competing with that

woman for the same branded niche in the power structure. Further, while Dexter's manipulateness is sometimes presented as creepy and immoral, it is also framed as clever and impressive, and object of appreciation for the audience. In contrast, a trawl through any *Dexter* fan forum will find many expressing their dislike of LaGuerta for the same kinds of behavior, which her embodiment codes as sly, bitchy, etc. Her best ally is Doakes, whose relationship with her was established before her ascension to management, and even he declines to back many of her political plays. As a brown woman in power, LaGuerta tries to play the neoliberal games of management, and finds little reward in it.

Dexter, in contrast, can count on the continuities between whiteness, maleness, and white collar professionalism. He can *disappear* into these broad categories, to display as little excess signification as possible. In doing so, he seeks a very different form of advantage than power managers like Batman and Paul Atreides sought. Whereas Paul sought to make his performances monumental receptacles of awe and fealty, and Batman generates intimidation and submission, Dexter seeks to become invisible, unremarkable, and unmemorable. He aims to be dismissed and forgotten, so that he can pursue his real objects of desire without interference. Indeed, by cajoling others into investing in his performances of harmlessness, Dexter is able to siphon affective and material resources away from the "legitimate" networks of labor and affect relations, in order to subsidize his deviant pleasures.

All these racial politics would be operative even if Dexter's secret pleasure was not killing people. But it is important to note that Dexter's white skin obscures his "dark

passenger” from the view of everyone except his double, James Doakes (**fig 9**). Only Doakes can see Dexter, but everyone can see Doakes. Doakes can never pass, can never be invisible, because every black man is always already an object of scrutiny, let alone one as marked by violence as is James. It is this current of recognition between violent men that inverts the a key trope in the late 1990s Office Escape formula in *Dexter*: the real threat to Dexter’s freedom is not

his manipulative manager, Lieutenant LaGuerta, but rather the colleague who refuses to *play the game* of politics with Dex at all. In *Fight Club*,



Fig 9: Doakes is not fooled by the doughnuts

Office Space, and even *American Beauty* a noncompliant and implicitly violent colleague is the gateway to liberation. Here, Doakes is the threat to Dexter’s comfortable façade.

I will return to the antagonism between Dexter and Doakes below. Doakes, as a black man cannot escape being “marked” as a killer, even though he only kills in the sanctioned roles as cop and soldier, while Dexter’s unsanctioned violence of personal fulfillment goes unmarked. Dexter’s violence supplements—even if it does not *serve*—the state’s disciplinary violence.¹⁶ This links the managerial surveillance and office politics of the Miami PD to the larger apparatus of state surveillance and state violence.

¹⁶ It is important to note, though, that while Dexter’s desire for violence has been *channeled* into the project of vigilantism, there is nothing “pro-social” about the desire itself. Dexter is compelled to *kill*, not to punish. Justice is not Dexter’s own desire, but rather the fig leaf his mentor Harry placed over that desire to manage his own complicity in Dexter’s actions. While Dexter, as we see him in the series, is defined (or at least confined) by “Harry’s code,” that code exists to facilitate Dexter’s asocial desires, not the other way around. As Kotsko argues, the “Code, then, is directed first of all at survival, then at giving him an outlet [...] only then at something like vigilante justice” (*TV Sociopaths* 79).

Thus, *Dexter* brings together the shifting rhetoric of US corporate culture with a related set of changes taking place in structure of the US security apparatus after 9/11.

3.1.2 The War on Terror and the Corporate Subject of Surveillance

Public perceptions of state surveillance and state violence were evolving rapidly as *Dexter* aired. The public discourse of technowar that framed the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in American popular culture brought risk management, “smart weapons,” and “shock and awe” bombardment into a new configuration, one that built on but ultimately disrupted the “smartness” discourse of the Revolution in Military Affairs that had been a key influence on power management fantasy throughout the 1980s and 1990s. As it became associated with the war on terror—a vast and seemingly endlessly expanding institutional enterprise—power management lost key nuances that had allowed it to translate the systemic logic of financial speculation into a fantasy of individual empowerment.

At issue is a crucial shift in the way arbitrage is represented. Arbitrage works as an *ideal* in the financial logic of derivative trading because it figures riskless profit as a function of timing and market position. What makes arbitrage so attractive to those seeking to valorize (in all senses) their cognitive labor in all the spheres of competition (patterning themselves as markets within finance ontology) is its ability to translate the immaterial products of cognitive labor—knowledge, flexibility, and precision—into “real” market value. As it is appropriated by fields from military strategy to public policy to self-help quackery, the *conceptual metaphor* of arbitrage imagines the profit margin of arbitrage to be proportional to the situational advantage in these three areas that the

arbitrager holds over other market participants at the moment of exchange. This ideological fantasy of capital exists at the heart of power management: the idea that *individual subjects* who have rigorously interiorized the logic of finance (such as Paul Atreides and Bruce Wayne) might use their superior knowledge, flexibility, and positioning to leverage *small* investments into super-powerful effects.

This ideological fantasy of arbitrage is crucially different from the way arbitrage creates value in actually-existing financial practices, where positioning leverages *big* investments into even *bigger* effects. The “riskless” profit derived by capitalizing on knowledge or positional disparities in the market remain relatively small at the per-unit scale. The commodity prices, stock values, or currency exchange rates that form the basis of derivatives bets need fluctuate only a few tenths of a percentage point to create an opportunity for arbitrage. The resulting riskless profit may only be pennies on the dollar. To make money on such arbitrage, you need to move a *lot* of capital—typically tens or hundreds of millions of dollars. Institutions are much more likely than individuals to have the requisite amount of mobile liquid capital on hand to participate in this kind of trading. Derivative instruments, which bundle and leverage speculative bets from across the market system, can boost the potential profit margins per-dollar-invested at the cost of increased risk exposure. As LiPuma and Lee argue, “when financial agents combine different types of derivatives they allow for an extraordinary and unprecedented degree of leverage [...] so *relatively* small wagers can mover larger financial mountains, or more to the contemporary point, relatively large cumulative bets can revalue the currencies of entire countries” (*Financial Derivatives* 108, my emphasis). I emphasize their use of

“relatively” because the price of entry into derivatives markets means that they remain a volume business closed to all but the richest individual market actors.¹⁷

This gap between arbitrage as an idealized cognitive metaphor, in which the return-per-unit invested is proportional to the relative knowledge advantage of the arbitrageur, and arbitrage in financial practice, in which profit is as much or more a function of the volume of capital invested, is one of the structural contradictions that the ideological fantasy of power management magically resolves (or at least elides). Yet this gap becomes a yawning chasm within the shifting rhetoric of military strategy after 9/11. As Ashley Dawson, Randy Martin, Jasbir Puar, and others have argued, the discourse of limited warfare, “surgical strikes,” and special operations developed throughout the 1990s was built on the speculative fantasy that small but precise investments of force would be sufficient to contain threats and maintain dominance—the fantasy of power management. The War on Terror retained power management’s language of leveraging and precision, but rearticulated them within the registers of “full spectrum dominance” and “shock and awe”—in effect their framing of the efficiency of force changes from doing more with less to doing more with more.

No figure expresses this contradiction more than Donald Rumsfeld, whose own entrancement with power management fantasy put him at odds with military leaders during the planning of the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and contributed to the irrationality and ultimate failure of the whole enterprise. Rumsfeld was intimately

¹⁷ This price of entry is denominated in social as well as monetary capital. Both Ho and Wosnitzer, anthropologists studying the culture of finance, have noted that most derivative instruments originate from a very limited set of metropole institutions, who hold self-reinforcing standards about who can be trusted to “do deals” with.

involved in pushing RMA doctrines during the 1980s and 1990s. Even as the US entered into massive, open-ended occupations under his watch, Rumsfeld clung to the financialized language of the RMA, insisting in a 2003 NPR interview that military forces must “be able to move quickly and be agile and have a smaller footprint” to be meet the challenges of the new Global War on Terror (Inskeep). In practice, this led to the Bush administration greatly expanding the size and scope of Special Forces operations, which fit their preferred RMA-style thinking, while underestimating the size and scope of conventional military and diplomatic resources required by the massive projects they were undertaking.¹⁸ The US’s commitment of massive conventional air and ground forces was justified and described using the “agile” language of smart weapons and special operations—resulting in a force that was too large to be nimble and too small to be overwhelming, a failure on both fronts. As *Washington Post* reporter Vernon Loeb wrote after interviewing skeptical military staff in 2003, RMA enthusiasts like Rumsfeld used the Iraq invasion “to prove their own theory that a light, maneuverable force could handily defeat Iraqi President Saddam Hussein... [which] resulted in an invasion force that is too small, strung out, underprotected, undersupplied” to be operationally effective. When their scenarios of total information dominance and surgical no-strings military adventure were played out in reality, Rumsfeld and company proved themselves to be poor Batmen indeed.

This slippage between power management ideas of nimbleness and precision and the messy reality of aerial bombardment and ground occupation became increasingly

¹⁸ For coverage of Rumsfeld’s clashes with Pentagon planners, and his commitment to the power management fantasy of the RMA, see Hersch, James, Loeb, Margolick, O’Hanlon, and Scahill.

obvious as the war dragged on. Despite Rumsfeld's emphasis on "the care that goes into [the use of aerial bombardment], the humanity that goes into it, to see that [only] military targets are destroyed... it's done in a way, in a manner, and in a direction and with a weapon that is appropriate to the very particularized target" (qtd in Deer, 2), the accompanying images of whole blocks disappearing in gouts of fire and smoke, repeated *ad nauseam* on every news channel in the first days of the war, give the lie to the implicit claim that such precision leads to any reduction in scale of destruction being unleashed, even before, as Ashley Dawson argues, "the protracted occupation of an increasingly unhinged and violent Iraq made the hubris of RMA doctrines dramatically apparent" ("War in Hell" 172). Indeed, despite the premium RMA rhetoric places on knowledge—both of the situation and the disposition of one's own assets within it—every aspect of the US invasion revealed the occupiers' profound ignorance of Iraqi history, politics, and culture, and their *inability* to accurately foresee the impact of their policy within that complex social environment.¹⁹

As in the arbitrage of futures markets, in the military logic of the War on Terror the combination of precision targeting with overwhelming force creates a methodology of power that is incommensurate with individual agency. The sheer scale of the forces the US brought to bear in the name of total surveillance and preemptive action gave the lie to the fantasy that a single figure could monitor and police the world, as "peak Batman" did in *JLA*. As was the case with the adoption of the "flexible" managerial rhetoric by

¹⁹ As LiPuma and Lee argue, this pattern within the US War on Terror, in which interventions that are touted for the precision of their targeting are originated and deployed in ignorance of (or indifference to) local circumstances, replicates the way that racist and colonial assumptions are built into the structure "country risk" in of derivative instruments, because of the way they price the ethnic and political diversity (*Financial Derivatives* 2-3, 55-59, 120-1, 182-85).

corporate bureaucracy, the use of the power management lexicon of mobility and precision to justify the massive operations being rushed into being by the security apparatus after 9/11 disrupts the aspirational metaphor of arbitrage in power management discourse at a structural level, even before the disastrous reality of the War on Terror did its own work demystifying and delegitimizing the RMA discourse Rumsfeld and company used to justify their mismanagement of power.

The Bush administration's adoption of the transformational language of the Revolution in Military Affairs to articulate the massive institutional project of the Global War on Terror had the effect of shifting the terms of most people's interaction with these ideas from aspirational fantasy to oppressive reality. Increasingly, Americans understood themselves as *objects* of such *institutionalized* power management, rather than the ones who deploy PM techniques as fantastically empowered *subjects* of power management.

At this confluence of military and corporate discourses, *Dexter* provides an interesting case study because both the "hollow" structure of Dexter's interiority and his sardonic, manipulative social performances are figured as means for *evading* the surveillance and affective control of contemporary society.

One of Dexter's early lessons in affective management captures this point succinctly. In the fourth episode, Dexter's foster father and reluctant mentor Harry discovers the young Dex leading a group of boys who are bullying a teammate, Simon.

Harry: What the hell is going on?

Dexter: We're just having fun.

Harry: It didn't look like Simon was having too much fun. You're always telling me to fit in, and I'm just trying to be part of the team.

Harry: You can't be a bully, Dexter. First of all it's wrong. Secondly, people remember bullies. People like me-- cops. A bully is a felony waiting to happen. So...
Dexter: Blend in. (S1E04 18:20-19:00)

When Harry admonishes him, Dexter argues that he was just trying to fit in. Indeed, joining in bullying behavior is an expected part of the pack behaviors of heteronormative adolescence. By performing this behavior, Dexter not only established his dominance over the situation, but he probably gained a great deal of short-term social capital with the other boys. But when Harry clarifies, it becomes clear that he was not chiding Dex for just a moral lapse, but rather a strategic one. Despite the short term benefits of joining the bullies (which he in no way disputes), Harry emphasizes the way that it exposes Dexter within the regulatory gaze of the surveillance state. The short term advantage that might be gained by exploiting the possibilities of each interaction, then, must be balanced against the longer term project of remaining unmarked by the regulatory gaze.

Within the space of freedom Dexter maintains through his deceptive practices, he pursues an *individual* practice of violence that lives up to Rumsfeld's stated ideals—Dexter ensures that only guilty “targets are destroyed [...] done in a way, in a manner [...] that is appropriate to the very particularized target.”²⁰ Dexter incarnates the ideals of surveillance, precision and flexibility that organize the larger security discourse after 9/11, but he is able to do so precisely because he works as an individual, outside any national or institutional framework. Of course, while Dexter operates outside such frameworks, everything he does relies on their continued existence. No matter how

²⁰ Indeed, *Dexter* pushes this specificity to the level of dark comedy (or at least to morbid pun), as when he stages the death of a serial drunk driver inside an abandoned liquor store (S1E02).

cynically or sardonically he draws on the norms of whiteness, maleness, and Americanness, his performances re-inscribe those norms. While Dexter's goals are non-social and apolitical, his actions have intensely political effects.

As I noted in the introduction, the qualities of transparency, mobility, and freedom from commitments that Dexter cultivates in his performance are not only associated with hegemonic whiteness, but with speculative capital itself. Just as Dexter circulates just below the surface of the social, pursuing his pleasures in the gaps of perception, derivative instruments allow capital to circulate in spaces beyond the perception of the public, and therefore beyond accountability to the public discourses of civic democracy.

4.5 Function vs. Form in the Fantasy of Financial Capital

While, as LiPuma and Lee argue in *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk*, derivative trading has been central to the cultural ascendance of financial capital since the 1970s, I argue that the ways that the *logic* of the derivative has been represented in popular fantasies of financial power has evolved over the years, an evolution that structures the trajectory of power management. For most of the 20th century, from *Dune* through *JLA*, power management texts expressed derivative logic primarily through the interplay between the derivative's nominal *use value* in the "real economy"—hedging against anticipated risks—and its idealized *speculative goal* for the financial industry: the riskless speculative profit of arbitrage. But while 20th century power management is able to think the *goals* sought by the hedging and speculating parties of the derivative contract, little reference is made to the *form* of the derivative instrument itself. The 20th

century power manager achieves dominance through spectacular displays of the cognitive labor of finance—systemic analysis, risk management, and arbitrage—but those displays rarely take on the specific form of derivative wagers.

Dune explores how the pressures and affordances of the finance ontology of neoliberalism are negotiated at the level of the self. As an exemplary capital subject, Paul disciplines his consciousness, remaking his interiority in finance capital's image: "mobile, nomadic, short term, and flexible" (LiPuma and Lee 37). His "loss" of stable masculine identity is the condition of the power he accrues through his arbitrage of all things in the novel. The arc of Batman's interaction with the Justice League in the 1980s and 90s expands on *Dune's* exploration of financialized individual subjectivity, showing how neoliberalism's finance ontology restructures social and political discourses of power, bringing them into line with the logic of speculative capital. As I noted in Chapters 2&3, the specific form of the derivative wager does begin to appear as part of power management narrative in the late 1980s. Following Martin, though, I think that these moments express these texts' attentiveness to the ways that the logic of finance was reshaping military and political discourse during the period, rather than attentiveness to developments in finance per se. Thus, while they register the derivative's growing sociopolitical relevance, they do not signal a fundamental shift away from arbitrage as the central representative device for power management. By dramatizing the slow collapse of comicbook cosmopolitics in the face of expanding neoliberal governance, texts like *Batman and the Outsiders*, *Justice League*, and *Kingdom Come* focus on how the social world is remade by finance capital—rather than focusing on the derivative form as the

driver of speculative capital's expansion—the evolution of the Justice League in the DCU represents the becoming hegemonic of neoliberalism as the unified organizing principle of self, market, and society.

Starting in *JLA*, and increasingly after 2001, the specific *form* of the derivative instrument, and the particular institutional structures, professional roles, and structural relationships associated with it start to rise towards the surface of power management texts' fantasy of speculative capital's domination of reality. In part, this is a function of finance capital's restructuring of both individual and society in its own image—the trajectory traced by 20th century power management texts is effectively complete. But this shift in representational strategy also reflects the (slowly) growing public awareness of derivative trading, its distinctiveness from older forms of finance, and its importance to the increasingly volatile “new economy” of 21st century capitalism.

While both Paul and Batman functioned as heroic fantasies of speculative capital, their heroic performances of systemic analysis and risk management still incorporated one of the important use values of speculative capital for productive capital and the “real” economy: hedging against concrete, specific risks. For Batman especially, the anticipation of threats and the preemptive development of countermeasures and contingencies have always been central to his heroic performances, even before his transformation into the power manager par excellence.²¹ Yet as many scholars of finance have noted, there is a crucial difference between the imagination of *concrete* risk—

²¹ Even in the campiest moments of the Adam West show, this mastery of concrete risk defined the character. Consider the obsession with concrete risk on display in one infamously goofy scene: Batman survives attack by a (clearly rubber) shark because he came prepared with a variety of “Oceanic Repellant Bat Sprays.”

associated with productive capital and classical political and military strategy—and the conceptualization of *abstract* risk that animates contemporary finance and the forms of speculative strategy it has influenced. Dexter’s “diminished” power management dramatizes the logic of abstract risk.

LiPuma and Lee examine this distinction between concrete and abstract risk at length in *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk* (75-83, 119-23, 134-5, 141-157).²² *Concrete risks* arise from each individual asset, contract, or investment’s position within a unique conjunction of material and social factors that may threaten its profitability. This remains the common sense understanding of risk amongst the public, along with common sense ideas about how such risks are assessed and managed: through market research into the details of each conjunction. Based on such research, investors “place directional bets on whether the stock price will go up or down, given their knowledge of the companies and their estimate of future risks that the company might face (such as commodity prices, inflation, strikes, etc)” (LiPuma and Lee 142). Here profitable “market knowledge” is still clearly tied to apprehensible details of the “real” conditions of the productive economy.²³

²² The cultural impacts of abstract risk are rigorously theorized by the Cultures of Finance Working Group at New York University, which includes Arjun Appadurai, Benjamin Lee, Edward LiPuma, and Randy Martin, as well as their collaborators in the Wealth of Societies Project. See the Project’s collectively published *Derivatives and the Wealth of Societies*.

²³ This approach persists in the form of “Value Investing,” the strategy of scrutinizing companies to identify stocks that may be *undervalued* by the market. Widely publicized by Warren Buffet, the finance professionals I talked to derided value investing as combination of “platonic ideal” and PR ploy. Like derivative trading, value investing demands both insider access and deep pockets—making it a sucker’s bet for the average citizen-investor—but its continuing presence within in the *public discourse* of finance serves to reassure the public that concrete risk and long term commitment are still functional concepts within the finance industry.

While this remains a narrative of investment common in financial services advertisements targeting small investors, professional traders have been moving away from it since Harry Markowitz's elaboration of portfolio theory in 1952, which argued that rather than trying to estimate the concrete risks of each individual asset themselves, traders should look instead to the pricing history of the asset, which is taken to be the market's "aggregation of these risks as measured by [the asset's] volatility" (LiPuma and Lee 142-3).²⁴ The social, material, and historical specificity of each investment situation is elided when wildly different forms of risk (the risk that workers might strike, that consumer tastes might shift, that exchange rates might vary) are measured and priced using the same metric of volatility. This homogenization of specific risks into a general measure of volatility is compounded by the second innovation of portfolio theory: "in contrast to previous forms of financial analysis, which focused on the impending risks or rewards of each investment [...] portfolio management focused on the relationship between risks and rewards in the portfolio as a whole" (LiPuma and Lee, 77-8). The ideal portfolio, then, "is not the one with the least absolute risk, but rather the one with the greatest relative spread between incurred risk and potential return" across its diversified holdings. Pricing the average volatility of a bundle of investments abstracts even further from the social and material realities of concrete risk.²⁵

²⁴ As LiPuma and Lee note, Markowitz's reasoning only holds *if* the assumptions of mainstream economics are correct (i.e. the market aggregates the knowledge and rational self-interest of investors to accurately "price" the value of traded commodities).

²⁵ As LiPuma and Lee note, this is another aspect of finance in which "*The theoretical endpoint* was riskless profit or arbitrage" (77-8)—even though the practices in question don't bear much direct resemblance to short-selling or cross market trading. They make similar points 37-8, 117.

In 1973, Fisher Black and Myron Scholes published “The Pricing of Options and Corporate Liabilities,” and “once the markets’ participants accepted [the authority of this mathematical model] they could calculate options pricing *mechanically* [...] the *Wall Street Journal* began to carry software advertisements for figuring options prices (LiPuma and Lee 78). As economic theorists extended and elaborated on the Black-Scholes model, LiPuma and Lee argue, there was not only an accelerating proliferation of derivative products from the late 1970s onward, but also a widening gap between

those working in mathematical statistics knowing very little about the substance of finance [...] and [traders] in the financial world grasping the mathematics in only the most mechanical and econometric sense [...] Computer pricing programs and the in-house technicians who [designed and operated them] would functionally and socially mediate [between those worlds] (79-80)

As finance capital in general, and derivative trading in particular, becomes more powerful in society, these in-house quantitative analysts or “quants,” who *mediate* between the traders and the abstracting technology of the pricing equations, take a central importance in constitution of finance ontology. This is because they are entrusted with the work of transmuting the *relational categories* of human social life into the *object categories* of objective, observable things (LiPuma and Lee 80-1, 119-22). While portfolio theory could draw on the existing price history of the underlying assets, in the “over-the-counter” or OTC markets, the Black-Scholes pricing model is used to estimate the abstract risks of highly specific speculative conjunctions, often arising out of the concrete details of particular business deals and sociopolitical moments.^{26, 27}

²⁶ “[To] construct an OTC derivative ... the bank’s derivative specialists would identify the types of risk likely to be encountered (such as currency and interest rate), quantify their level of potential risk [as] volatility, [and] determine a price or premium predicated on these calculations” (LiPuma and Lee 41) To reprise the example used in earlier chapters, a corporation might enter into a 5-year agreement to assemble

Here the logic of abstract risk, which had originally evacuated the concrete and the social to arrive at purely quantitative measure of volatility, now turns that stochastic logic back on the social, sorting the myriad forms of concrete risk into stochastic categories (counterparty risk, country risk, political risk) that claim the objective status of separate and autonomous things.²⁸ In practice, LiPuma and Lee argue, this leads not to a nuanced valuation of risk, but rather to

a kind of telescopic process [which] reduce[s] extremely complex local realities to encapsulating images [...] financial markets, animated by Western ideology [...] affix specific and different sets of images to each locality in an attempt to quantify the [...] risk inherent in its politics. (58)

These “encapsulating images” not only reinscribe racist and colonialist assumptions and circulate them as economic “facts,” but global capital’s hostility to any local political organizing hostile to its interests is “understood as a natural response to an objective reality” (122). At the interface between corporate interest and the abstracting technology of risk, quants are primary architects of the financial base undergirding capitalist realism.

cells phones using parts sourced across the globe, and to sell them at a set price. The profitability of such a deal is contingent on a host of factors. Some are fairly easy to quantify: for instance, the deal will only be profitable if the currency exchange rates between the nations in which the parts are produced and the phone is assembled and sold remain within a certain range. Other factors are harder to define, like shifting regulatory and trade policy environments in each of those nations, changes in the technology and competitive alignment of the cell phone market, or even shifting patterns of consumer preference. Rather than trying to evaluate and hedge against all these risks individually, the company could hire a financial institution to construct an OTC derivative that combines all these risks into a single instrument

²⁷ “The plurality of incommensurable types of risk is reduced to a singularity. The various concrete, specific types of risk—concrete and specific because they are drawn from real social conditions—are abstracted into a single, homogenous whole that the financial community may price” (LiPuma and Lee 146). Thus “socially disembodied and aggregated,” abstract risk takes on a fetishistic character akin to that Marx identified in the exchange value of the commodity (LiPuma and Lee 139, 144).

²⁸ As LiPuma and Lee put it, “the nominalization of distinct types of risk, helps to transmute the thing named, because its existence is no longer inseparable from other relations. It becomes [...] an object that has a definite and autonomous character” (121).

Dexter showcases how the shift from concrete to abstract risk inflects power management as a cultural fantasy of financial authority and subjectivity. Compared to the focus on the skills of the arbitrageur in *Dune* and *JLA*, in *Dexter* the labor of “quants” is the key cognitive metaphor.²⁹ In contrast to the power manager-as-arbitrager, who profits directly from a series of leveraged investments based on his privileged apprehension of specific opportunities *as they arise* within the market system, the power-manager-as-quant draws on the logic of abstract risk to translate the complexities of the market system into “encapsulated images,” and use them to interpret it *for others*.

Where *Dune* imagined powerful literacies that could grasp the whole complexity of world, *Dexter* settles for profitable shorthand. While one of the draws of the show is the variety of complexly rendered characters in the ensemble cast, and the vibrantly realized density and diversity of its Miami setting, these aspects of the show’s *execution* are held in tension with Dexter’s narrative point of view.

Like the traders using the Black-Scholes software to navigate the market, Dexter calculates his options mechanically, algorithmically based on his own “price history” of interpersonal success or failure. For Dexter, all human interactions are sorted into a limited set of social object categories. Once he has decided which “images” of the social to “affix” on the local situation, he responds with an equally limited set of routines to manage the risks he associates with those categories: “Brother, friend, boyfriend, all part

²⁹ Data analysts and data analysis are increasingly represented directly in American television, in shows like *Numb3rs* (CBS 2005-12), *Person of Interest* (CBS 2011-16), and *Mr. Robot* (USA 2015-), though the skillset of data analysis often collapses back into the established tropes of “hacking.” As was the case with bankers and investors, in this project I am more interested in tracing how the cognitive *skillset* of quantitative analysis circulates through popular culture, rather than focus on direct representations of the profession itself.

of my costume collection” (S1E04, 14:00). Rather than developing a depth analysis of each subject he seeks to influence, as Paul does in *Dune*, Dexter has developed an abstract, *generalized* model for interacting with others in his life, and uses that to manage a portfolio of relationships that minimizes his *aggregate risk* while maximizing his *aggregate returns* of social capital. The approximate “telescopic” categories with which Dexter maps his options, and the “encapsulating images” he produces to navigate it, rarely capture the nuance of the situation, or the complexity of other characters’ experience and motivation, but they are usually *sufficient* for passing challenge at a surface level. Indeed, Dexter maintains his serene detachment by “floating” on the surface of these images, avoiding entanglement with the awkward depths.

The first season offers countless examples of Dexter’s algorithmic, category-based approach. One of the best examples also serves as our introduction to the office environment of the Miami PD headquarters where much of the show will take place. In this scene, Dexter carries a box of doughnuts through the building, and the mundane, interpassive rituals of conviviality that they facilitate serve metaphorically as the key that buys him access to the temple of law enforcement (S1E01 14:00-16:15). This sequence provides the audience with evidence of how sociality works to generate the haphazard surface of “the world” in *Dexter*, and how Dexter mechanically and algorithmically games this process.

In the first part of this sequence (**fig 10**), Dexter plays through his interpassive doughnut protocol with some random one-off characters. I call it interpassive because the form of interaction that Dexter cultivates here fits Van Oenen’s definition of an activity

in which the participants are more interested in the *process* than the *products*. All of the dialogue is generic “small talk.” Other than demonstrating that he knows their names (Sue and Dan), Dexter does not have to customize the script at all. As the second frame in **fig 10** shows, much of Dexter’s “participation” amounts to little more than vague, non-verbal expressions. Yet, these vague tokens are readily accepted, because they facilitate the interpassive process that is more important than any “content” or “information” they produce. What they do is less important than the fact that they did it together. He leaves them with an “encapsulated image” of himself as a “good guy.” By investing a small amount of effort into making the interaction possible, Dexter creates a portfolio of small value but highly diversified social capital.



Fig 10: The interpassive doughnut ritual

Crucially, the last shot of in **fig 10** shows Sue and Dan moving on to engage in further small talk, leaving us with the nagging question of whether their performances of amity are any different than Dexter’s. How many of them are being just a cynical in their cultivation of these professional relationships? Here again, we receive *Dexter’s* triple hail of the viewer. First, as the regulatory gaze of the big Other, who “floats” on the surface of

the collective image of collegiality and professionalism that everyone in the scene collaborates to produce. But also as the two distinct subjects who *can* see the gaps, the “hidden truths lying beneath the surface,” but read them differently: the empathetic subject who sympathizes with the desire to feel connection and belonging, and the purely instrumental neoliberal subject who seeks to expand its portfolio of social capital.

In the rest of the doughnut sequence, though, we see how little Dexter tweaks this script when he applies it to people he knows more familiarly: Deb, Angel, and Camilla (an old family friend and surrogate mother figure (**fig 11**)). Dexter provides a bit more customization to the script for each of these more intimate characters, adding a bit of gentle ribbing for Deb, some Spanish for Angel, and some hammy flirting with Camilla. But in these conversations, he also uses the essentially emptiness of the ritual, the same interpassivity that *generated* a vague sense of *connection* with acquaintances, to *maintain distance* with his intimates, returning to the generalized, scripted parts of the ritual when he wants to



Fig 11: Doughnut redux

control the direction of the conversation. We see this especially with Camilla. Dex is using the doughnut as a pretext to get unsolved casefiles from her—material for his recreational pursuits. For Camilla, the doughnut is a pretext both for inquiring about his

welfare, and for intimating that she suspects the truth about him—and so, the danger that she puts herself in by helping him.

Dexter: Doughnut?
Camilla: You keeping your fingernails clean?
Dexter: Never leave home without my rubber gloves.
Camilla: Good boy.
Dexter: So, anything new?
Camilla: One of these days you're gonna tell me [what you do with these files].
Dexter: I already told you. Blood spatter doesn't take up all my time. I like doing it. Maybe I can help out. It fills my nights.
Camilla: You have a morbid sense of fun.
Dexter: That's probably true.
Camilla: You should find a pretty girl.
Dexter: I found you.
Camilla: Charming like your father. Just don't get me fired.
Dexter: Then who would I bring doughnuts to?

Rather than acknowledging Camilla's attempts to move the conversation towards the “truth” of his vigilantism, which lies “hidden beneath the surface” of their conversation, Dexter sticks to the rituals of small talk and flirting, as if they were not just the pretext—the surface they create together for the big Other “who cannot know” what they both clearly do. While this is, in some ways, an impressive use of those tools to subtly exert control over the situation, it can also be read as part of the inherent conservatism that comes of relying on “price history” models. Dexter keeps the conversation within the bounds of the familiar scripts, whose outcomes he can reference with past iterations.

In his role of “work friend” with colleagues Angel Batiste and Vince Masuka, Dexter employs a similar approach, sticking to basic scripts with minimal customization. For the first four episodes, the only clear difference between his approaches to the two

men is that he sprinkles some Spanish into his conversation with Angel.³⁰ Much of the “friendliness” that goes beyond shared professional interest in forensics (which Dexter does not have to fake) takes the form of putting up with their attempts to engage him in masculine sexual banter.

A clear example that shows both how blithely Dexter navigates such banter, and the higher stakes it has for the other characters, is in Episode Three, when Angel and Vince attempt to explain some of the misogynistic lingo they have been bonding over to Dexter (S1E03 9:48-10:30). As Angel describes the “bronco” sexual maneuver, both he and Vince act it out, engaging in some homosocial thrusting (**fig 12**). Dexter’s responds with only a look of bafflement (this time fairly honest), but this expression is still a form of participation that authorizes the whole



process to continue, as his edification is the pretext for the whole endeavor. While Dexter is happy to reap the low-risk return of passive disavowal, Deb stakes a riskier bet by attempting to match Angel and Vince’s performance of macho solidarity. By demonstrating her familiarity with their degrading lingo and so, implicitly, a shared

³⁰ The generic quality of Dexter’s relationship scripts is emphasized when, in episode five, Dexter tries to replicate his success at work in the more fraught arena of heterosexual romance “I wonder what I did to make Angel think we’re so close...I wonder if it would work on Rita?”

delight in the masculine sexual dominance it implies, she tries to over-write her own frequent consignment to the status of a sex object in that very discourse. In this case, the wager seems successful, as Vince and Angel shift to admit her into their homosocial circle, with Angel even giving her an approving nod... but the moment displays how little Dexter must do to maintain his welcome in their esteem, and how much Deb must risk to do the same.³¹

Again, while Dexter's own participation in these sexual conversations is minimal, his willingness *to participate* allows the process itself to happen, and it is this visible participation in the masculinizing performance of the banter, rather than any specific context of the banter itself, that is important to Angel and Vince. Such banter is one of the ways that they struggle to project their desired identities into the social space of the office. By *passively* participating, Dexter manages to generate a useful amount of masculine "belonging"—valuable social capital—while also claiming the *moral capital* of being "too nice" to be uncouth himself. He's both "one of the guys" and "a nice guy"—constructing the public image of his masculinity as a hedged position.

Dexter constructs a derivative performance of power management. He harnesses his complex awareness of the social environment not to create relations of dominance, but to create a carefully hedged position of relative but dynamic stability in the affective marketplace of the office. He wants to be liked enough to be trusted with information and

³¹ The sexual and representational politics of this scene for Angel, Vince, and Deb are deep and complex. They must carefully triangulate how their participation in this interaction plays to or against expectations of their race, class, and gender. As viewers, *we* can appreciate the tightrope each is walking, the awkwardness that threatens should they err. Compared to the weight of this empathy *we feel for them*, we apprehend Dexter's serene indifference. He does not have to know or care—a sociopathic freedom that, through repetition of such fraught scenes, we are ultimately invited to envy.

resources, but inoffensive and submissive enough that he is not a subject of rivalry or competition. He balances his investments in the overlapping social codes so that when one of his performances in one area exposes him to risk, he can “call” an “exchange option” and switch to another code that will stabilize his safe position.

An excellent example of the way that he uses such portfolio-like hedging to stabilize his position in the office is how he handles his two most difficult relations there: with his superiors Lieutenant LaGuerta and Sergeant Doakes. Throughout season one, LaGuerta flirts with Dexter. It is easy to read this as her attempt at a bit of affective power management: trying to secure a male employee’s loyalty with the possibility of sex. Or it could just be an expression of her power over Dexter: she shows off the impunity she feels viewing him as a sex object. Either way, it presents Dexter with a greater dilemma than did the sexual banter of

his male colleagues, because the consequences of sending the wrong return signal—an irate boss—are much higher. As a result, his responses to her have to contain a carefully rationed amount of interest, without enough to indicate he would like to escalate the shows of affection *at this time*. We can see this is the

very first of these interactions in the first episode (**fig 13**). Despite wishing “she would stop” in the interior monologue the audience alone has access to, his public response to her salacious wink with a smile and nod—but this is delivered as he accelerates in the



other direction. Why would he encourage such a risky set of interactions? Because, as in portfolio theory, the impact of such risk must be evaluated in the context of one's other investment—as the overall spread of volatility. Dexter's relationship with LaGuerta, risky as it is, helps him hedge and offset the risks in his other most difficult relationship, with Sgt. Doakes.

As I noted above, Doakes refuses to play any of the interpassive office games with Dexter. This is because, for the most part, Doakes does not play the game with anyone. There is no point because, as a black man, his “surface images” are largely outside of his



control. Doakes plays the role of the angry black man in his interactions, because it is easier than trying to play against that role social expectations allot to him. For the most part, his brusque manner irritates his friends and alienates potential allies, but when it comes to Dexter, it enables Doakes to see the “hidden truths that lie beneath the surface” (**fig 14**). Because he isn't drawn into any of Dexter's conversational gambits, Doakes gains access to the instrumental perspective that the audience shares with Dexter. Doakes is the one who wonders what Dexter is after, what he really wants out of his various intentionally vague performance of harmlessness within the office.

Dexter is aware that his usual scripts do not work on Doakes. He tries the approaches that work on Angel and Vince, but gets nowhere with them. He tries helpfulness, but that is rebuffed as well. For the most part, Dexter settles for abject

submission, refusing to rise to Doakes's challenges. When even that will not work, however, Dexter exercises the "option" he keeps open with LaGuerta, subtly appealing to their "special" relationship. She will overrule Doakes and stifle that particular confrontation—even if it is merely deferred. We can see this strategy at work later in episode one. Doakes begins a confrontation with Dexter, channeling his intuition about Dexter's "wrongness" into an attempt to exclude him from the professional space of the detective's meeting (35:00-36:00). While the language he uses is one of rank—Dexter is a tech, rather than an officer—Doakes is really advancing a moral claim. Dexter's attempts at submissive behavior do not work to defuse the growing tension. But Doakes makes a mistake when he attempts to enforce his situational advantage over Dexter by appealing to LaGuerta (**fig 15**). Not only is she a more receptive audience for Dexter's exaggerated performance of submission, but she is able to over-rule Doakes, as a personal gesture toward Dexter, with the implication that he is incurring a debt he might have to pay off in future intimacy. Everyone involved in the interaction catches the implication. Angel is amused, Doakes infuriated. While his choice escalates the future risks of his interactions

Fig 15: Portfolio theory at work



with LaGuerta, he ensures that Doakes's view of him will supplant the image of harmlessness he has worked to achieve, stabilizing the status quo and preserving his position of privileged invisibility.

Dexter's ability to choose when to claim the privilege of expertise, and when to adopt the position of submission, come not only from the portfolio of relational positions that he has invested in, but also from the structural position he occupies in the office itself. Unlike his colleagues (excepting Masuka), Dexter is not a cop. He does not carry a gun or make arrests. He is officially divorced from the visceral, violent aspects of law enforcement—his body is not the site of his labor, his professional performance involves neither bodily coercion nor bodily sacrifice on behalf of the social order. However, his contingent participation in the labor of policing serves to *reinforce* his alignment with the cognitively-focused, office-based white collar aspects of Detective-level policing. As a “lab geek” Dexter is able to operate at the privileged center of policing culture—entry to which requires years of development and promotion for regular cops. His presence at this “executive” level—a mark of highly visible distinction to normal cops—is instead rendered *less* visible by his seemingly subordinate status as a tech. He is low in the department's *official* political hierarchy, while remaining high in the *informal* hierarchy of cognitive labor. He is invisible but indispensable. Claiming a position of technical expertise, but explicitly *not* claiming managerial authority, he is included at the top levels of activity without having to jockey politically to maintain that position. His performance does not have to include masculine dominance displays, as the detectives' must. And when Doakes---who sees through this ruse and seeks to challenge Dexter's real position

of power within the order of cognitive labor—attempts to challenge Dexter through the codes of masculine peer-struggle, the others read it as inappropriate bullying of an underling. Not only does Doakes fail to alert the rest of the office to Dexter’s “otherness” and his outsized influence on their investigations, but his attempts to challenge Dexter only serve to further secure Dexter’s standing within the department. By performing graceful-but-flustered submission, Dexter accrues social capital he uses to further hedge his comfortable position, gaining more access to department resources to redirect towards his private endeavors.

Not only does Dexter implement his abstracted map of social relations to navigate social situations in so as to balance his safety and privilege, he also gains buy in from other characters by breaking off bits of that map and sharing them at opportune times. Other characters regularly come to Dexter for advice about their professional and personal dilemmas (**fig 16**). His sister looks for advice about navigating office politics as she moves from the blue-collar codes of street policing to the white collar detective world. Angel consults Dexter about maintaining the domestic façade of heterosexual success. In exchange for his advice, Dexter is rewarded with trust, which he re-invests to hedge against moments when his real interests and projects risk exposure. Like the objectified vision of the OTC specialist, Dexter’s highly schematized mapping of the social are often crudely reductive and miss the nuance of the local situation, but they nevertheless ring true because they succinctly (if cynically) crystalize normative assumptions about



situations *should work*, and how normative subjects *should be working* to achieve their ends.

Dexter's projected affect of friendly, even-tempered calm reinforces the seeming objectivity of his perspective. Of course, the cold detachment of Dexter's "real" affect, revealed through his noirish voice-over narration, chimes even better with the market ontology of capitalist realism. Indeed, by offering up his schematized, instrumental perspective in the form of highly quotable aphorisms, Dexter gains a similar buy-in from *the viewer as well*. We are enticed into his neoliberal subjective view for the simplicity and clarity it seems to offer. Fans take great pleasure in accumulating and re-circulating Dexter's nuggets of self-serving wisdom, even though, like the derivative's objectification of concrete risk as abstract risk, that wisdom ultimately conflates the needs of capital with natural law.³² The more viewers internalize Dexter's perspective through such fannish engagement, the less exceptional he becomes, and the more intensely their subjectivity is subsumed by neoliberalism.

The power manager's spectacular cognitive labor identifies and calculates the complex interplay of multiple overlapping value systems and performative scripts within a situation. The power manager not only charts out positions within this field which offer him risky opportunities for great return, he *also* identifies carefully hedged positions of relative stability. In an increasingly complex and volatile cultural system, such positions of relative stability become new sites of privilege. The power manager can not only perceive and occupy such positions himself, he can extract rents and fees in exchange for

³² As LiPuma and Lee put it, within the logic of abstract risk, the "corporation's own needs" take on the appearance of "undeniably objective [...] abstract necessity" (122).

sharing his systemic mapping with others. In 21st power management television like *Dexter*, the flat-affected neoliberal subject emerges as a font of insight and advice, a model for insulating ourselves from the wave of human tragedy that surrounds us. Ultimately, for viewers and other characters alike, Dexter invites buy-in because he promises to relieve the unrelenting awkwardness of the increasingly messy and disjointed social reality neoliberalism itself produces.

4.6.1 Awkwardness and the Affective Arbitrage of “Floating” Values

In his Zone series on negative affects (*Awkwardness* 2010, *Why We Love Sociopaths* 2012, and *Creepiness* 2015), Adam Kotsko focuses on cultural effects and pop-cultural expressions of the breakup or breakdown of normative social codes since the 1970s, particularly the codes of middle class and white collar life—the most unmarked and invisible codes of whiteness, though the impact of their dissolution radiates outward into the coding and reception of more marked identities as well. In *Awkwardness*, Kotsko argues that in contrast to the ironic disavowal that characterized the 1990s, popular culture in the 2000s expresses a widespread cultural recognition that fraying cultural norms are no longer able to structure our social interactions. The inherited norms of “traditional values” have been thoroughly discredited—both by progressive critique and socioeconomic obsolescence—but no alternative standards of conduct have reached hegemonic acceptance. Awkwardness becomes cultural or structural when we find ourselves in situations where there is either no mutually recognized standard of conduct, or where multiple contradictory standards seem to apply. The distinctive mix of misrecognition, indecision, and paralysis that results, Kotsko argues, is the essence of

“awkwardness,” and popular culture has increasingly become preoccupied with negotiating our seemingly inescapable internment in these moments of affective crisis.

Kotsko argues that the disintegration or dislocation of American social norms has been developing since the 1960s, but popular culture has in the past developed various guises or masks to deal with—or at least distract from—the yawning chasm of awkwardness. The malaise and nihilistic decadence of the 1970s gave way to the chipper revanchist denialism of Reagan’s “morning in America.”³³ By the 1990s, this active denial bled out into the ironic pose central to so much 1990s cultural production and consumption, in which the “traditional values” of the mythical 1950s were performed in increasingly bad faith. Kotsko argues that the satirical, queer-inflected invocations of kitsch Americana by left-wing artists from Pee-Wee Herman to David Lynch to the B-52s were, like the right wing culture wars of the day, ultimately grounded in nostalgia for the (comparatively) stable categories of the 1950s and 1960s. Both revanchism and transgression depend on such categories for their fidelity or defiance to signify.

This culture of ironic distancing interacted with the disenchantment of Clintonite Third Way politics to foment the crisis of interpassivity in the 1990s, discussed in chapter 3. As critics from Althusser to Žižek have noted, the ironic actor declares “I am

³³ “Morning in America” has become shorthand for Reagan’s brand of nostalgic, neoliberal conservatism. The phrase originated in the iconic “Prouder, Better, Stronger” campaign advertisement, which ran during Reagan’s 1984 re-election campaign. Framing Reagan’s first term as a return to national health and normalcy after the weakness and excess of the 1970s, the ad paints an idyllic picture of white, middle-class, heteronormative America, an image purged of the racial tensions (everyone is white), class conflicts, and “culture war” disputes that marked real political life in 1980s America. The ad smoothly cloaks the aggrieved affect of conservative revanchism in the symbols of victory. The ad’s subtext is not only to revel at how much cultural terrain the right has taken back, but to imagine how much further the Reagan Revolution might go. Much left countercultural production of the 1980s and 90s—especially in the “mature” auteurist turn of mid 1980s comic writing—revolved around exposing the implicit violence within this revanchist symbolism of re-conquest and erasure.

performing this action, but I don't really *mean* it. I don't *believe* in it. I will take pleasure in the act's execution, but the pleasure I take is *somehow unusual*, and must be distinguished from both the *normative connotations* and the *normative outcomes* of this act." Conversely, within the prevailing climate of ironic performance, attempts at sincerity increasingly verge into the bad faith of hyperbolic performativity as well. The "sincere" actor insists "I am performing this action to signal—to others but more importantly to myself (and perhaps to the big Other as well)—that I *still* believe in it. While this impulse animates many resurgent fundamentalisms on the American right during the late 1990s, one can also see it in popular texts like *Fight Club*, whose protagonist(s) attempt to pierce the affective miasma of irony and consumerism by grounding experience in the immediacy of the body-in-pain, but find that even these desperate attempts at masculine authenticity collapse into simulacra and hyperbolic performativity.

Put this way, it should be easy to see the continuity of this atmosphere of irony with the separation of process and product Van Oenen identifies at the heart of interpassive culture and politics. In both cases, the actors' investment and intention in the act—the terms of their participation in the *process* of performance—takes priority over the consequences or products of the activity. The effect of these bad faith and interpassive performance in the 1990s, Kotsko argues, is to estrange subjects from the social codes and fracture those performances' claims to normative authority, without positing clear alternative norms in their place. The paradoxical effect is that while their status as *norms for conduct* is discredited, their status as *codes of signification* is

reinscribed, because both subversion and fanaticism require rules that are always-already broken for their affective frisson. Further, as social and political norms lose traction and become less effective at regulating behavior and producing their ostensible social products, the mechanisms of neoliberal governance step in to fill the void, as *JLA* documents so vividly. As politics and civil society fails as a *normative* sphere, neoliberalism (in both its market and carceral forms) supplies *coercive* inducements to replace them.

This environment of disintegrating but still recognizable norms is the cultural environment assumed by 20th century power management fantasy. This cultural environment facilitates the affective arbitrage of the power manager, because when people deny or ironically disavow the “real” structure of the social relations they participate in—misunderstanding or at least underestimating their “real” investments in their performances of identity—that create a gap between the “surface” of social reality and individual’s self-knowledge. Through feats of spectacular cognitive labor, the preternaturally perspicacious power manager recognizes the distance between the inaccurate value the actor places on their performance (whether ironic or sincere), and the “real” value it has in the socio-cultural matrix, and leverages knowledge of that gap to extract social capital.

This kind of socio-affective arbitrage is the stock-in-trade of power managers like Paul Atreides and Batman. Both use such privileged knowledge of other characters’ “real” affective investments to control others through manipulation and preemption. The neoliberal displacement of civil discourse initially creates another layer of misrecognition

and “distorted market knowledge” within which the power manager can reap profits, as well as providing new “official” models and markets for the kinds of financialized social manipulation the power manager trades in.

Yet Kotsko argues that in the 2000s, the trajectory of detachment and disavowal craters at last. The disintegration of WASP norms’ hegemonic authority reaches a critical point at which irony falls away and pure awkwardness seeps in. What Kotsko calls “Cultural Awkwardness” results when the social norms of the postwar boom, savaged by decades of critique, irony, and satirical deconstruction, prove unable to paper over the cracks of a social world ravaged by the emiseration of neoliberalism. Revanchist and satirical forms of the old order persist, but they grow increasingly stylized and insular. A multitude of social codes jockey for recognition, but none can claim normative status.

Kotsko argues that the “awkward turn” in 21st century popular culture negotiates this normative upset, dramatizing the pervasive 21st century experience of an affective life in which, seemingly all of a sudden, *all* social structures seem ad-hoc, bricolaged together in the midst of performance by participants who cannot count on a shared understanding of the performative codes they cobble together, either at the time of production or—in increasingly surveilled times—at future moments of review and judgement.

This setting of pervasive cultural awkwardness has two important consequences for the power manager. First, the power manager’s evacuation of interiority and instrumentalization of affect leave him largely immune from what Kotsko calls the “sociality” of awkwardness. Not only do we feel awkward about our own social

performance, Kotsko argues, but we tend to share in the discomfort and anxiety of others we see stranded in the gaps between normative systems. Television shows like *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (HBO 2000-) and *Arrested Development* (Fox, Netflix 2003-)—not to mention a great deal of “reality” television—are driven by the mixture of schadenfreude and cringing sympathy we feel when characters can no longer anticipate or control the interpretation of their actions. While the power manager often feels *personally* awkward, because they maintain a sardonic distance from the social norms they manipulate, their purely instrumental relations to others means that they are not susceptible to the contagiousness of awkward situations. Rather than any sympathetic cringe with the affective distress they witness, power managers perceive only weakness—and so opportunity for their own gain. The prospect of trading in our vulnerability to this contagious sympathy for the safe distance of mere pity or pure schadenfreude is one of the chief appeals of sociopathy at the heart of 21st century power management fantasies like *Dexter* (fig 18).



Fig 17: *Arrested Development*

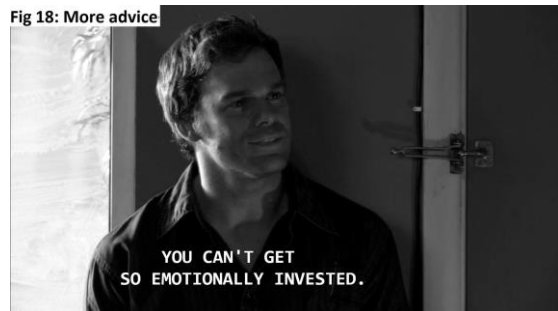


Fig 18: More advice

Second, within such an unstable, fragmented cultural system, the power manager’s portfolio of skills for apprehending the complex topography of social/affective ecologies and leveraging that knowledge for social profit take on new significance. While

the 20th century power manager arbitrated the gaps between the waning norms and individual's performances of self, 21st century power managers increasingly resembles the labor of the quantitative analysts who design complex "over the counter" derivatives, described above.

4.6.2 Awkwardness, Possibility, and Privilege in Dexter

Dexter is defined by feelings that do not match up with social expectations—he is always hyper-aware of *his own* awkwardness. Yet at the same time, he is uniquely exempt from the *social* quality of awkwardness—he is unmoved by the awkwardness of others. This combination of being constantly burdened by, but also miraculously free from the experience of awkwardness makes him an ideal protagonist for our awkward era. It is precisely because of the awkward collage of social codes in the multicultural office that the "Code of Harry" serves Dexter so well. The "Code of Harry" stabilizes the relation between adhering to norms and his own abnormal desire. He can feel comfortable—even dutiful—as he dissembles to all and sundry. At the same time, the routinized whiteness of the Code is recognized by everyone, even as Dexter performs it in its "old fashioned," just-obsolete inflection. In this mode, it loses its official coercive power, but remains a set of scripts that people know how to play out. People know how to interact with Dexter according to the scripts of whiteness, even though those scripts apply only to him, not to them. They are invited to participate in the familiar rituals, but also invited to do so via interpassivity, without consideration of the meaning or consequences of the interaction. Dexter uses this interpassive blur as a protective camouflage.

Unlike Batman and Paul Atreides, who maneuver to maximize their return on investment in the form of trust, awe, and fear—the traditional currency of masculine dominance, even when they are pursued by nontraditional means—Dexter also invests heavily in perceptions of dismissal and contempt. He can tap these negative perceptions to deflect attention, to deescalate challenges, and redirect inquiries away from his “real” interests and activities. He channels his unique experience into the characteristic form of 21st century power management: he is a white guy who trades on his cognitive labor, not to dominate others, but to preserve his privilege and experience a relative freedom in increasingly immiserated and repressive neoliberal culture.

In his analysis of *Dexter*, Kotsko identifies a slim vein of progressive possibility in Dexter’s insensitivity and the seeming serenity with which he slips into his social roles. While our ability to empathize with others can be an important motivator to social and political action, empathy can just as easily prevent us from engaging with others in need, because engaging with their pain and distress means taking on that pain ourselves. In acknowledging the awkwardness of others negotiating the chaotic unequal spaces of capitalism, we risk being swamped ourselves. Emotional fatigue can easily overwhelm the drive to do right. Dexter’s indifference cuts through this emotional interference. When the scripts of “brother, friend, [or] boyfriend” call for him to drop what he is doing and help, Dexter tends to do it. He gives people rides, brings them dinner, and performs all the other material shows of support that make kinship networks function. One might ask, as Kotsko does,

what is a genuinely nice guy [...] if not someone who is in the habit of acting like a nice guy? How many people, when consoling a friend, honestly feel empathy in

any gut-level way? [Dexter] believes that performing these rituals when he doesn't 'really' feel the corresponding emotion makes him a kind of monster, when in reality everyone else is going through the motions as well. (*Sociopaths* 85)

How much better would we all be, to our families, friends, lovers, and communities, if like Dexter we just did what we thought we should, without agonizing about whether we "really" wanted to? As Dexter tells a young sociopath he tries (ineffectually) to mentor, pretending helps.

Yet Dexter's diligence in doing what is expected leads him, not only to many selfless acts of kin-keeping, but more often to re-inscribing the violence and exclusion of the status quo. Dexter uses the skillset of power management to instrumentally manage his sardonic performances of self, but the material from which he shapes these performances is drawn from the conventional scripts of whiteness and heteronormativity. For Dexter, normative performances of whiteness and heterosexuality are a smokescreen, a project of brand creation and management. They are effective tools for Dexter precisely because of the multicultural urban spaces he is navigating. At least in the first season, Dexter does not identify strongly with maleness, whiteness, or heterosexuality in themselves (he does not care, and so is powerful and free), but he must cling tenaciously to them as styles of performance because of the combination of social power and invisibility they convey. Even as his whiteness renders him exceptional in the multicultural office, the structural "unmarkedness" and banal not-to-be-looked-at-ness of generic whiteness means that he not only embraces these racialized performative codes, he actively abets and abuses the racist power dynamics that underlay them.

The white supremacist roots of the respectability politics in “Harry’s Code” are made explicit in season 2, in which Dexter frame Doakes for his own crimes. Because Doakes is a black man whose social performance bears the mark of violence, his friends and colleagues in the Miami PD find the charge all too believable. Dexter’s *personal* culpability is foregrounded when he physically imprisons Doakes (**fig 19**). Although Dexter does not



personally, physically kill his longtime rival, he does circulate the “encapsulating images” of violent black masculinity that kill Doakes’s social self and creates the conditions of possibility where his physical death is a bygone conclusion. Dexter chooses his own comfort, the continuity of his stable white surface, over Doakes’s life.

4.7 “Score one for the Wooden Boy”: The End of Exceptionalism

Both the narrative power and the diagnostic utility that I have identified in *Dexter* are driven by the opposition between the series’ close attention to the complex circumstances in which its characters of color struggle to stake their claims to identity and authority in the multicultural space of Miami, and Dexter’s serenely indifferent, procedural approach to surviving and thriving in the same environment. I argue that this opposition creates a nuanced, layered position for the audience, and that much of the interest and engagement the series engenders comes derives from this positioning.

But *Dexter* does not maintain this balance for long. As early as Episode four, Dexter’s starts to lose the distance and detachment that defines his character. He starts to long for authenticity in terms familiar from the Office Escape films, whose tropes the

show originally subverted. In his interactions with the Ice Truck Killer—soon revealed to be his lost brother Brian—he rediscovers his desire to be “seen,” to create a social identity that is more than an ad-hoc assemblage of scripts, managed for optimal return.

The turn comes in his voice-over narration, as he muses that

Harry was the only one who saw me really saw me. So he taught me to hide. That's what's kept me safe. But sometimes, I'm not sure where Harry's vision of me ends and the real me starts. If I'm just a collection of learned behaviors bits and pieces of Harry maybe my new friend is right. Maybe I am a fraud. (S1E04 37:45-38:15)

Moments later, he has his first “successful” sexual experience with Rita. This sets up the dynamic of the rest of the season, which will be repeated for the rest of the series. As he says near the close of Episode five, “Ever since Harry’s death, I’ve been alone. But now, for the first time, I feel alone.” The question becomes who Dexter will establish his connections with: another killer like Brian? Or will he make a “normal life” with Rita? He feels more and more attachment in both directions, and so, like everyone else in the show, his character arc is composed of negotiating between competing claims on his identity, feeling pulled in multiple directions at once. While he retains his power management skills, he is no longer a pure neoliberal subject. He has become like everyone else.

4.8 Conclusion

Dexter provides a clear example of both the awkward turn Kotsko identifies, *and* the way power management takes on a new, derivative form within this environment of normative and affective flux. Dexter’s sardonic detachment from the awkward crisis of performative authenticity that plagues everyone in the show gives him a privileged

perspective from which to assess the social ecology, and, as it did for Paul in *Dune*, this privileged perspective allows him to persuade and manipulate those around him. For the most part, Dexter is less focused on using this position of epistemic privilege to maximize his immediate interpersonal advantage—to “score on” those around him in the style of 20th century power arbitragers of the social. He does not seek to turn every relationship into one of dominance, as Paul and Batman did. Instead, he plays a longer, more conservative social game, playing for a stability that is itself an expression of white privilege amidst the slow apocalypse of capitalist realism.

Against the backdrop of diverse, realistically drawn characters like Deb, Angel, LaGuerta, and Doakes who struggle and largely fail to navigate this complex social ecology, Dexter’s his contemplative confidence about what to say and do to escape from the awkward situations these conflicting codes create seems like a superpower. In this context, Dexter clearly lives up to Kotsko’s definition of the sociopathic fantasy: “If I really and truly don’t give a fuck ... I will be powerful and free” (*Sociopaths* 5). Vicarious access to Dexter’s freedom from the sociality of awkwardness and the burden of “authentic” performance is a major pleasure of the show, over and above the murderous pleasures to which he applies his power management skills.

Yet *Dexter* cannot maintain the structure that creates these dynamics. As Dexter starts to become more “human,” desiring connection and some authentic expression of his “true self,” he stops being a “pure” neoliberal subject and becomes just another subject *dealing with neoliberalism*. He becomes just like everybody else, one more hustler. The unique tripartite position that *Dexter* constructed for its viewer collapses—or

at least, the viewer is left to hold up the neoliberal subject position alone, as Dexter drifts away from it towards increasingly maudlin and cloying sentimentality.

Even if that pure neoliberal perspective could not be maintained, it remains useful, not only as a historical marker, but for the way it clarifies power management's investments in hegemonic masculinity and white supremacy, investments that were less visible—if no less important—at the grander planetary scales of its 20th century forbearers. While *Dexter* fails as a critical text, or as a Utopian one—despite Kotsko's hopes—it exposes the line of attack for any attempt to productively engage with power management's vision of super powered speculative subjectivity. In the final chapter, I look at how Iain M. Banks's *The Player of Games* tackles the problematic masculinity of power management head-on, pushing it to a “death-change” of utopian transformation.

Chapter 5
Queering Speculation:
Contesting Neoliberalism by Accelerating Hetero-Masculinity in
Iain M. Banks's *The Player of Games*

5.1 Introduction

Chapter One read *Dune*'s Paul Atreides retrospectively, as a precursor or presentiment of neoliberalism's injunction to manage the self as a capital project. In this proto- and prototypical capital realist myth, Paul achieves total dominance over both nature and culture by being the first to apprehend and manipulate the complex market relations that always-already structured both. Chapters Two and Three examined how the DC Comics character Batman functioned as a popular fantasy of power during the 1980s and 1990s, one that mapped neoliberal finance ontology's emergence into cultural dominance. While many of the texts resisted the neoliberal drive to rearticulate heroic agency as competition between human capitals—the myopic perspective of finance ontology—by the late 1990s *JLA* figured Batman's power management not only as the dominant mode of individual superheroic performance, but as the dominant model for effective socioeconomic and political agency in general. Across the long arc of Batman texts, power management migrates from the specialized discourses of financial, managerial, and military strategy into generalized public discourses of governance and power in popular culture. In the process, the normative language of individual subjectivity and liberal democracy are both rearticulated within the finance ontology of neoliberalism.

Chapter Four reads Showtime's *Dexter* as an exemplary text of Capitalist Realism, which imagines institutionalized power management's total domination of the

possible. In these texts, power management becomes less a tool of domination—no corner of the social remains unconquered—but rather a means of evading surveillance and affective entanglement. Dexter’s submission to caustic rigors of power management affords him a fugitive space of unregulated pleasure, and a blissful freedom from the pervasive awkwardness of a society whose values “float” unpredictably. Dexter assembles a portfolio of social relations that maximizes his security and gratification within the bleak affective landscape of late capitalism, but his machinations ultimately serve to reinforce finance ontology’s enclosure of desire and futurity. Despite the critical moments we find in power management narrative, from *Dune* to *Dexter*, the trajectory of this popular fantasy of power seems to run in parallel with and ultimately ground itself in the claims of Capitalist Realism.

In this final chapter, though, I return to science fiction, and a challenge to that dreary trajectory. In Iain M. Banks’s *The Player of Games* (1988), we find a powerful counternarrative, in which the same set of power management elements that fueled neoliberalism’s ascendance in the Batman I’ve examined, and which define the horizon of experience in *Dexter*, are rearranged and rearticulated, becoming instead the underpinnings of his liberal-humanist utopia, the Culture. As Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. argues in *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, claims about “future possibilities” always involve “looking backward at the imaginary unfolding of the present’s lines of force” (79). Not only does Banks’s Culture present a radical alternative to the ascendant neoliberalism of the 1980s, in *The Player of Games* he shows how that alternative could develop out of neoliberalism’s own self-identified “lines of force.” By engaging directly

with the technocratic, managerial fantasies at the heart of neoliberalism's appeals to "governance" through "best practices," Banks's novel forcefully rejects the claim that "there is no alternative" to the competition and inequality perpetuated and normalized within neoliberalism.

Rather than naturalizing the forms of subjectivity demanded by emergent neoliberalism as the other power management texts examined here do, *POG* subjects it to a form of *accelerationism*. Steven Shaviro argues that "accelerationism is best defined—in political, aesthetic, and philosophical terms—as an argument that the only way out is the way through. In order to overcome globalized neoliberal capitalism, we need to drain it to the dregs, push it to its most extreme point, follow it into its furthest and strangest consequences" (*No Speed Limit 2*). The novel's protagonist, Gurgeh is an avid player of competitive games. His dedication to strategy and game theory has shaped him into kind of power manager, whose literacy of complexity translates the social-affective networks around him into markets of risk and opportunity. But the more Gurgeh manages himself as a competitive project, approaching his life as an "unbounded field of competition" through the finance ontology at the heart of power management, the more dissonance he experiences within the post-scarcity world of the Culture. Unlike Paul Atreides, Bruce Wayne, or Dexter Morgan, Gurgeh's power management is not figured as a super-adaptive source of power and privilege, but rather a form of social disability holding Gurgeh back.

Only when he is immersed in a competitive alien society, in which he must embrace and magnify his competitive drive—to the point of briefly eclipsing the rest of

his identity—does Gurgeh come to recognize, defamiliarize, and pass beyond the pathology of self-interested competition. This *acceleration* of Gurgeh's competitiveness—and the readers' engagement with it—serves to radically denaturalize and estrange both power management's portfolio of speculative techniques and the neoliberal assumptions that ground their claims to superlative effectiveness and cultural dominance. The neoliberal subjectivity Gurgeh initially embraces is refigured as atavistic rather than futuristic, a dead end that the Culture itself worked through and transcended in the course of its formation. Gurgeh—and the reader—must retrace that path in order to reach the climactic epiphany that redeems the strategic scheming of the Culture AIs as equal to project of radical utopian freedom. The novel's accelerationism is thus a kind of inverted *retroaccelerationism*, one which robs neoliberal capital of its vanguard chic and its claims on the future, identifying it instead as a force of stagnation and reaction, a drag on the radical potentialities of both speculative technology and liberalism humanism.¹

In *The Player of Games*, then, Banks seeks both to reclaim the radical possibilities of liberal humanism *and* to liberate the speculative toolset of technocratic governmentality from the neoliberal imaginary. The novel's political project is thus both highly ambitious and deeply problematic. But when viewed within the historical period of its composition, 1978-1987, these dual commitments make sense. As Banks revised and reworked the novel, he was watching the Thatcher/Reagan revolutions shake the foundations of Anglo-American political life. Comparing manuscript drafts of the novel

¹ Read this way, Banks's *retroaccelerationism* resonates with work by David Harvey and others to recast neoliberalism not as a future-oriented program of disruption, but as a backward-looking project that seeks to restore both elite class power and systemic profit.

from 1979 and 1985 to the published text reveals how Banks reshaped the narrative in ways that respond directly to the political challenges of that time.² In its final form, *The Player of Games* is an attempt to save the radical possibilities of liberalism from the savage neoliberalism it was transforming into, to preserve what Wendy Brown described as the “liberalism of profound egalitarian commitments, rich humanism, and a strong ethos of the public good” that forms the ideals for (if not the current administration of) higher education. In *The Player of Games*, Banks engages with the emergent neoliberalism of the 1980s which imagined a technocratic, speculative risk management of human capital. He responded with the Culture, in which the objects of capital accumulation are “better living standards, better health, human talent, better human relationships, democracy and peace” become the *ends* rather than the *instrumental means* of collective social organization (Brown *Undoing* 187).

The Player of Games (*PoG*) grants the postindustrial maxim that social reality is a complex system, a field of risk and opportunity that can be strategically “played” according to game-like rules to obtain optimal returns. Banks figures the vast sweep of galactic space as a speculative system upon which the Culture Minds speculate for social, economic, and military returns. At first glance, this appears as an instance of the capitalist present colonizing our imagination of the future, of finance capitalism dictating the terms of utopian possibility. Like the quants of the OTC derivatives markets, the Minds claim to have mapped out the present’s lines of force, “pricing” the possible risks, and so identified optimal opportunities for “investments” that shape profitable futures—i.e.

² I was able to examine the *Player of Games* manuscripts held at the University of Sterling through the generous support of an RD Mullen Fellowship.

manipulating their own and other social systems.³ In the “historical” appendix to *Consider Phlebas*, Banks writes that the Culture Minds “could prove statistically that such careful and benign use of [its resources] did work, in the sense that the techniques it had developed to influence a civilization’s progress did significantly improve the quality of life of its members, without harming that society as a whole” (451-452). As Simone Caroti puts it, “the people of the Culture believe themselves capable of engineering social change without damage to other societies” because of their faith in the Minds’ ability to speculatively manage the risks involved. “Every course of action is carefully weighed in terms of first-principle advisability, logistical practicality, and ethical desirability” (Caroti 16). Such appeals to stochastically derived truth resonate with the logic of financial derivatives, which as Lee and LiPuma argue, “shape a new means of grasping historical events, in that they presuppose that the market can reimagine and reduce sociohistorical presses, no matter how seemingly incommensurable or complex, to terms of abstract, quantifiable, and hence manageable risk” (Lee and LiPuma 134). The Culture’s faith in its Minds demands algorithmic abstractions similar to those “which underlie the performativity of derivatives, [and] function as [a] social ontology” of contemporary finance capital (Lee and LiPuma 135). Banks’s foregrounding of the speculative machine logic of the Minds, then, seems to implicate the Culture in the finance ontology of neoliberalism identified by Brown and Fisher.

Yet at every turn, the novel asks us to radically reimagine the terms of this strategic speculation, destabilizing neoliberal assumptions about the means and ends of a

³ Even within the neoliberal framework of capital development and return on investment, though, one must remember that within the post-capitalist Culture, the Minds seek to maximize social and affective “value”.

gamified existence. As Will Slocombe argues in his analysis of Banks' use of games throughout his *oeuvre*, "If games embody the idea of competition, of agonistics, then how we compete reveals our ethical stance towards others, the extent to which our strived-for victory is due to, or at the expense of, others" (136). If, for the Culture Minds, sociopolitical power is a speculative game that makes pieces of others, *The Player of Games* demands we ask if one can play that game in the name of, for the sake of, and in the interests of the pieces themselves. This is the central critical thrust of Banks's novel. Can one move beyond the competitive self-interest to common interest? How can the elements of neoliberal finance ontology be co-opted, redirected, or reimagined to support a communitarian project of abundance, equality, and collective enrichment?

In *The Player of Games*, Banks explores how the speculative capacities of power management—systems consciousness, risk assessment, asset management, arbitrage and leveraged investment—can be reimagined outside the competition and inequality that are the foundation of the neoliberal finance ontology of relations. As Wendy Brown, Randy Martin, and others have documented, in contrast to classical liberalism, in neoliberalism inequality and competition are held to be both necessary and valuable, but are no longer "natural." Both must be continuously reinforced by the neoliberal state, and "naturalized" through neoliberal ideology (Brown 36, 62-65). Banks turns this logic on its head, creating a Utopia that runs on speculation, but grounding that speculative play in a foundation of collaborative *cultivation* and affective *abundance*. These social, ethical, *aesthetic* qualities of the Culture are what underpin its claims to Utopia in the novel.

The Player of Games's sustained interrogation of neoliberalism's normalization of competition and inequality—the insistent “Greed is Good” ethos Banks referred to in his final interview as the “poisonous Thatcherite pus that comes oozing out of” all those who succumbed to her “baleful influence” (Kelly)—operates primarily through a nuanced interrogation of its protagonist's masculine subjectivity. *POG* foregrounds power management fantasy's imbrication of speculative cognitive labor with gendered domination, sexual violence, and political repression. Throughout the novel, the injustices and inequalities of the emerging neoliberal social order are linked to contemporary forms of masculine subjectivity and heteronormative desire, both of which demand legitimation through performances of social and sexual domination. In its plot and narrative structure, *PoG* figures the repudiation of heteronormative masculinity as a crucial step in unlocking the radical possibilities of liberal-humanist social democracy, and turning the portfolio of power management towards utopian rather than neoliberal ends. At the heart of *The Player of Games*, then, is an implicitly queer politics of Utopia.

This implicitly queer rejection of heteromale norms of competitive dominance structures the novel's portrayal of the Culture at both the “macro” scale of the social planning and interstellar relations, and at the “micro” scale of protagonist Gurgeh's subjectivity and intimate domestic relations. Indeed, the structure of the novel demands that we continuously reassess our understanding of the Culture's macro-level processes in light of Gurgeh's evolving subjectivity. Although the god-like AI “Minds” who run the Culture are not directly represented in the novel, readers are encouraged to consider—and then repeatedly *reconsider*—Gurgeh's systems-conscious game-playing as a cognitive

model for the Minds' administration of the Culture—politics as a form of serious play. The Minds' cultivation of the Culture differs in scale, *but not in substance*, from the pleasures the Culture citizens cultivate in their own lives.

A common criticism of Banks's liberal humanist Utopia is that he sidesteps the hard work of politics by placing the tools of biopolitical control into the hands of the Culture AI entities, who are imagined as inhumanly moral creatures beyond temptation. Yet I argue here that this move, which critics dismiss as a cheat or a shortcut, is used to dramatic critical effect in *The Player of Games*⁴. The novel carefully thinks the terms of this transferal by examining the neoliberal logic of power management in its most intimate gendered, interpersonal manifestations: in heteromale sexual “gamification” of sexual conquest and desire as well as its larger geopolitical connotations of imperialism, emasculation, and exploitation. Just as Gurgeh comes to realize, in the course of the narrative, that both his game-playing and his personal relationships were distorted rather than enhanced by his drive for competitive domination, so the reader is encouraged to reimagine the Minds' administration of the Culture as an intimate game played with passion but without the gendered drives for domination that have historically plagued human relations of power.

⁴ This critique very much applies to *Consider Phlebas* and *The Use of Weapons*, the other two “early” Culture novels with which *The Player of Games* is grouped by critics, and alongside which it is usually interpreted. In both of these novels, the utopian social relations of the Culture—including its utopian gender relations—serve only as a backdrop to masculine dramas that, while slightly ahead of their time, are still fairly conventional examples of what Susan Jeffords called the “new man” action drama of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Both *Phlebas* and *Use of Weapons* feature male antiheroes whose masculine performance offsets the Hard Body's “increasingly extravagant spectacles of violence and power” with “increasingly emotional displays of masculine sensitivities, traumas, and burdens” (Jeffords 172). These antiheroes' macho antics are juxtaposed to the hyper-rational Culture AIs and the implicitly feminized cybernanny-state they administer—a more sophisticated iteration of the cultural tensions negotiated in *Demolition Man* (Brambilla 1993).

Gurgeh must identify and renounce these drives within his own masculine subjectivity, while the reader is asked to identify and renounce entrenched cultural assumptions that similar heteromascuine drives must necessarily structure all strategic, systemic projects of politics and governance. As Caroti argues, for Banks “the ultimate objective of a game is not to win or dominate, but to understand and grow” (65). In the post-work society of the Culture, where all activity is structured as play, this “growth” sheds its connotations of mere capital accumulation, to encompass instead what Steven Shaviro calls accelerationist cultivation (*No Speed Limit* 46-55). Shaviro draws on the “affluent aestheticism” of John Maynard Keynes, connecting it to the genealogy of gay male self-care from Wilde to Foucault to articulate an aesthetic of *collective* self-cultivation which defies the neoliberal logic of self-management and the restless circulation and speculative abstraction of the derivative. Shaviro’s emphasis on the radical potential of “qualified and temporary satisfactions,” rooted in the history of queer self-care, connects his accelerationist self-cultivation to José Esteban Muñoz’s sense of queerness as “as structuring and educated mode of desiring that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine the future” (*Cruising Utopia* 1). Muñoz locates this mode of desire in the utopian bonds, affiliations, desires, and gestures [that] exist within the present moment” (*Cruising* 22-3, my emphasis). The “qualified and temporary satisfactions” of the queered quotidian, Shaviro and Muñoz argue, offer the best glimpse beyond the oppression, inequality, and enforced scarcity of the present’s material and affective regime, towards a utopian social order in which the desiring subject “is able to relax, with the assurance of being supported by continuing social abundance” (Shaviro

52). It is precisely such a quotidian experience grounded in the “assurance of social abundance” that *The Player of Games* ultimately strives to convey. Gurgeh’s *bildungsroman* journey is, ultimately, about learning to stop recreating scarcity in the midst of the Culture’s abundance, to relax enough to seriously peruse the “qualified and temporary pleasures” of the Culture’s queer utopia.

As Shaviro argues, there is “something spectral” about such “disinterested” aesthetic pleasure, “enjoy[ed] entirely for its own sake, with no ulterior motives.” It “oddly subsists alongside” the rational considerations of political economy, while remaining “apart from them” (*No Speed Limit* 26). But the neoliberal subsumption of all spheres of human experience to the logic of financial capital demands “the valuation of everything, even that which is spectral” (29). Within finance ontology of neoliberalism, the aesthetic experience is overridden, *possessed* by the “ulterior motives” of the market.

⁵ The “spectral” quality of the aesthetic is dispelled only to make way for a more malignant spirit. This is why, when both Shaviro and Muñoz discuss the radical potential

⁵ As Wendy Brown argues, capital subjects are not free to define their own “interests,” at least not in Benthamite terms of rationally seeking their own gratification. Self-management becomes a speculative practice where one develops the self in order to game anticipated competitive pressures within future markets in human capital (*Undoing* 42, 66, 109-11). The aesthetic sensibilities of the capital subject are similarly speculative forms of beauty are prioritized for their ROI. One’s aesthetic pleasure become important market signals, useful both for those considering investment in you, and those seeking investment from you (*No Speed Limit* 30). Such signaling becomes an “ulterior motive” that structures aesthetic experience: the capital subject polices its own desire (or at least, the expression of that desire) to “play” the market created by the desires of others. As Shaviro points out, this creates a paradox within the neoliberal conception of desire itself: Individual desire must be rationalized and disciplined, yet the generalized desire of the market is figured as boundless, ever-expanding, infinitely variegated (*No Speed Limit* 54). Shaviro argues that this paradox drains excess and transgression of their subversive charge. On one side, positing an infinite desire means that no matter how far limits are pushed, the result necessarily falls short of the totalizing jouissance sought (51-55). One simply opens up new “territory” for colonization by capital. On the other, the “revealed preference” of excess and boundary-pushing within neoliberal culture leads to the creation an imposed scarcity of experience, setting artificial limits for the many that can be safely “exceeded” or “transgressed” only by the privileged few—exactly the structure of desire that Gurgeh will encounter in the Empire of Azad.

of aesthetics, they invoke utopian futurity *by way of* mindful re-engagement with the immediate. When Muñoz locates in the “utopian impulse of everyday life [...] *something that is extra* to the everyday transaction of homonormative capitalism,” he doesn’t mean we need to look past or beyond the present moment. Rather, he calls for a heightened awareness of those moments that exceed or escape colonization by the spirit of neoliberalism, flashes of what waits for us beyond capitalist realism’s artificial horizon. Such a focus on “the present” is also conscious “making-present” (187) of a “queerness [that] is not yet here but approaches like a crashing wave of potentiality [...] knowing it as something else we can feel, that we must feel” (185). Muñoz and Shaviro put *cultivation* of such a feeling, the evocation of the aesthetic in defiance of straight time and market logic, at the center of their radical politics.

I read the Culture of *The Player of Games* as one vision of life in the wake of the “crashing wave of potentiality” Muñoz, invokes, the “fuller, vaster, more sensual, and brighter” social reality that is possible if we stop imposing material and affective scarcity and embrace an abundance in which everyone’s capital project of self is fully funded, freeing them to cultivate themselves and their pleasures “with no ulterior motives.” As Shaviro argues, “in our current age of capitalist realism [such an] ethos of surplus and self-cultivation seems bizarre, alien, and nearly unimaginable.” (55). This helps explain why critics tend to privilege and cite those moments when outsiders to the Culture impute a secret dissatisfaction behind the Culture’s surfeit of simple pleasures, rather than believing such a life could be a source of genuine satisfaction. Yet Shaviro insists that the mundane aesthetic of self-cultivation “makes sense as a response to the abundance that

capitalism actually produces, though without allowing us to partake of it. [Such an ethos is] a necessary component of any accelerationism worthy of the name” (55). In *The Player of Games*, Banks shows us that such an ethos lies at the heart of the Culture, from the rhythms of intimacy to the strategy of the state.

By accelerating the connections between masculinity and the logic of capital, pushing them until they collapse, *The Player of Games*'s queer accelerationist aesthetics point us towards the ways that queer relationality and radical self-cultivation—both, as Shaviro and Muñoz argue, practices of making-present a radical futurity—can pierce this false horizon of capitalist realism. This is a powerful and beautiful counter to the transhuman siren song of power management discourse, to finance capital's relentless colonization of futurity, and to the way both feed into the precorporation of desire and resistance that confronts left politics in the 21st century. In the rest of this final chapter, I trace the circuitous route by which Banks arrived at this utopian vision through a layered process of revision which embeds, in the body of the published text, the tensions, challenges, and radical possibilities within of neoliberalism's moment of emergence.

5.2 Situating *The Player of Games* in the Culture Series' Evolving Political Project

All of Banks' Culture novels are unapologetically “political” texts. As Tom Moylan has argued, the critical utopia is an inherently political form, which dramatizes the difficulty in imagining genuinely utopian social relations even as it struggles to represent them. Banks's Culture operates within this space of moral and political ambiguity, its claim to the Utopian label never easy or uncontested. Focusing on this productive ambiguity, critics have discussed how Banks has used his critical utopia to

engage with historically reactionary sf subgenres (space opera and action/military sf), as well as commenting on contemporary political policies and events such as the Gulf War.⁶

While *The Player of Games* is “typical Banks” in its exploration of the mutual entanglement of gender, power, and violence in a critical utopian setting, the novel also features significant departures from the approach taken in the rest of the series. Its narrative and affective structure are noticeably different. These differences have made the novel somewhat divisive within discussions of the novel by both fans and critics, many of whom find these divergences off-putting or disappointing. More seriously for our discussion here, when critics have approached *PoG*’s portrayal of the Culture based on expectations drawn from their experience with other novels in the series—especially *Phlebas* and *Use of Weapons*—they tend to read over or read past these divergences, or to chide the novel for them rather than appreciating the distinct perspective on the Culture that these differences afford.⁷

First, most of Banks’s novels follow the traditional formula of the outlander’s visit to utopia. The point-of-view character tends to be an immigrant, mercenary, or enemy who encounters the Culture as a challenge to their (and our) “barbarian” sensibilities. Further, these outsiders interact primarily with the Culture’s most exceptional, outward oriented elements—Contact and Special circumstances—a tiny

⁶ For exemplary scholarship on Banks’s subversion of genre conventions, see Clute, Mendlesohn, and Winter. On the impact of the Gulf War on his work, see Duggan 2007 and Vint 2008. Simone Caroti and Paul Kincaid cover all these connections extensively in their respective overviews of Banks’s work.

⁷ Overall, critics approaching the novel from political science perspectives tend to be more positive about the novel, while scholars approaching from sf studies are more likely to consider it inferior to—or subsume it to their reading of—*Phlebas* and *Use of Weapons*. I would speculate that some of this divergence rebounds to the historicity of sf scholarship: in the 1980s and 1990s, scholars tended to privilege the genre deconstruction of *Phlebas* and the flashy narrative structure of *Use of Weapons* because these were “serious” literary devices that served disciplinary purposes of legitimating the genre as an object of study.

minority of the Culture who don't reflect the "normal" citizenry and their life experiences. In contrast, in *The Player of Games* we start within the Culture's social and ideological heartland. Most of the characters we meet are "average" citizens. While the protagonist Gurgeh is portrayed as a misfit who is unhappy with his life in the Culture, his life experience is none-the-less a fairly typical one.⁸

The averageness of Gurgeh's experience is crucial to the *PoG*'s second major departure from Banks' usual *modus operandi*. Like most Culture novels *PoG* interrogates the political and moral implications of the Culture intervening in *another* society, but *PoG* also thinks harder than any of the other novels about what it means for the Culture to manipulate its *own* citizens "for their own good." The most defining trait of the Culture, its most basic claim to utopia, is the maxim that *within it* "nothing and no one is exploited." The Minds' treatment of Gurgeh in *PoG* threatens the Culture's identity in a way that no meddling in other societies can. The stakes of Gurgeh's experience for the Culture's politics within this narrative, then, are unusually high—and the dynamics of that relationship between protagonist and society are *very* different than the relations between "barbarian" mercenary and "civilized" sponsor found in the other books.

Both of these issues *within* the narrative are related to the third major divergence, which concerns the production of that narrative: of the eleven texts that make up the Culture series, *PoG* is one of the four that underwent an extended period of revision.

Banks completed early drafts of *PoG*, *Use of Weapons*, *Consider Phlebas*, and the story

⁸ Banks doesn't engage this directly with the life of average citizens again until the seventh Culture novel, *Look to Windward* (2000). And while an "average" orbital habitat provides the setting for *Windward*, the narrative is mostly concerned with the experience of foreign visitors, Contact administrators, and Minds, rather than the common human or drone on the street.

collection *The State of the Art* during the late 1970s. These early drafts were reworked several times before they saw eventual publication in the 1980s. This extended production cycle lead—at least in the case of *PoG*—to a complex sedimentation of meaning, in which a political and social critique of European social democracy in the early drafts was rearticulated and redirected towards a vindication of social democratic values in the face of emergent neoliberalism in the final published novel.⁹ The result is a text in which a “new” affirmative politics is haunted by the lingering echoes of an “older” negative one. This political haunting means that historicizing *PoG* as a response to Thatcherism—as many do—is more complicated and more rewarding than critics have realized.

Analysis of two early manuscript drafts of *The Player of Games*, dated 1979 and 1985, reveals that the most intense areas of revision were in the novel’s depiction of Gurgeh’s masculine subjectivity, his relationships and experiences within the normative domestic spaces “interior” to the Culture, and in the details of his recruitment by the Culture Minds. The elements of the novel that Banks reworked most intensely, then, are precisely those “divergences” that readers tend to disparage or disregard. In changing the balance of these elements across the revision process, Banks shifted the critical focus of his critical utopia, redefining the novel’s exploration of how the Culture’s radical rejection of exploitation operates at both the micro level of intimate interpersonal

⁹ While I was able to compare the *Player of Games* manuscripts at the University of Sterling, I was not able to perform equally thorough examinations of the other early manuscripts, so I cannot say how closely their revision process might resemble the sedimentation I found in *PoG*.

relationships and the macro level of social administration and state intervention within the post-scarcity world of the Culture.

Analyzing these differences illuminates the importance of the connections Banks made between neoliberal competitiveness, heteronormative desire, and atavistic masculinity in the course of revising *Player of Games*. Further, analyzing the pattern of these shifts in the context of the political moment in which Banks was making them, the Thatcher/Reagan Revolution 1979-1988, helps explain the aspect of the novel which has irked critical readers more than any other—nowhere is the Culture’s claim to Utopia *less* ambiguous than it is in *The Player of Games*. In what follows, will not only explain *why* this is true, but also why, in the historical context of 1978-1988, this positivity represents a carefully considered moral and political statement, rather an unfortunate lapse in Banks’s critical capacity, as many readers and critics seem to regard it.¹⁰ I analyze key moments of revision highlight the renewed focus on domestic spaces and mundane pleasures in the published draft, to show that the changes Banks made during the ‘80s are part of an explicit political project, in the face of ascendant neoliberalism, seeks to reaffirm the radical possibilities of social democracy by grounding them in everyday practices of sociality and pleasure identified by both Shaviro and Muñoz.

In *POG*, this implicitly queer politics of mundane pleasure is in turn defined against the aesthetic of *excess* that structures Banks’s other early novels (and so, by extension, many critics’ understanding of his work as a whole). The published text

¹⁰ This irritation tends to be expressed more as a tone of than a directly stated judgement, though some have been more explicitly dismissive—as Kincaid is throughout his overview of Banks’s *oeuvre*—or simply disappointed, as Abigail Nussbaum is when she argues that the “lack of ambivalence towards the Culture gives [her] pause [a] sense that [*The Player of Games*] aims lower than other Banks novels, and is a great deal simpler” (np).

performs a queer accelerationism that challenges rather than performs neoliberalism's claims on the subject, its desires, and its futures. Because Gurgeh projects his own competitiveness onto the Minds, and the reader is encouraged to do likewise, this focus on his interiority and intimate behavior redound to our understanding of the Minds as well. Accelerating Gurgeh's competitive masculinity ultimately queers subject, society, and speculative technology in the novel.

5.3 Queering the Narrative Structure

I'll start by highlighting the structural elements of the narrative central to my analysis, and then provide an overview of how Banks's changes to these elements served to shift the political investments of the novel from an essentially negative queer critique of social norms framed through an aesthetic of excess towards an essentially positive vision of an affirmative queer sociality grounded in self-cultivation.

Though *The Player of Games* is divided into four chapters, functionally the narrative comprises three sections.¹¹ In the first section, we are given an extended slice of protagonist Gurgeh's unhappy life on an average orbital habitat, deep in the sleepy interior of Culture space. This first section underwent the most intensive revision between the drafts. In each manuscript, Gurgeh feels unfulfilled and out of place within the Culture, but the reasons for that disenchantment, and thus its meaning, are different in each. Gurgeh's dissatisfaction with his "typical" Culture experience is explored through his relationships with the older drone Chamlis and the younger woman Yay, as well as a

¹¹ In the published draft, each chapter is introduced by a playful narrative voice that ultimately turns out to be one of the drones manipulating Gurgeh in the story. Given Banks' propensity towards such metanarrative games in his other fiction, many critics emphasize this framing device in their readings (see Caroti for a good example). My examination of the manuscript drafts shows that this framing was a very late addition, and played little role as a structuring device during the composition of the novel.

rotating cast of other minor players. Revisions to Chamlis and Yay's perception of and feelings about Gurgeh's maladjusted social performances show Banks's evolving thinking, both about what the Culture's social norms are and how they are socially enforced. Through revisions to Gurgeh's interactions with Chamlis and Yay, and the introduction of a larger set of social relationships with other supporting characters, Banks moves from a piecemeal staging of set-pieces showcasing the Culture's transgression of heteronormative capitalist taboos, towards demonstrating how its social practices work together to create a coherent system of meaning, a viable alternative to the neoliberal social order.

At some point in each draft Chamlis suggests that Gurgeh appeal to Contact, the part of the Culture that deals with other civilizations, asking them to find him some adventure that might fulfill his misfit longing. The second section happens when Contact grants his wish. Gurgeh travels with the drone Flere-Imsaho to the barbaric capitalist dystopia of Azad, to compete in the complicated gaming tournament that structures their hierarchical society. Azad exemplifies the finance ontology of neoliberalism: in both the game and the political order that grows out of it, competition subsumes and provides the model for all other elements of society. Within each draft, immersion in this hyper-competitive environment leads Gurgeh to an epiphany about his game-style during the final match, one that re-affirms his fundamental identification with the Culture and its values, providing new context for his disaffection and preparing him to return to the Culture and participate more smoothly in its social practices. The same climatic game that re-integrates Gurgeh into the Culture leads to the destruction of Azadian society. The

Culture Minds are revealed as the true “players of games,” the paramount practitioners of power management in the novel. While both Gurgeh and the Azadians participated in the competition willingly, neither consented to the Minds’ manipulation of the process, nor could either predict the dramatic results. By sending Gurgeh, the Culture Minds manage at one stroke to successfully intervene both within and without, restructuring their own citizen’s subjectivity *and* the rival state’s system of governance according to the Culture’s preferences.

The comparatively brief third section recounts Gurgeh’s return home, and his reunion with Yay and Chamlis. These final scenes explicate the “lessons” his adventure taught him about himself, the Culture, and his place within it. The “lessons” in this final scene serve a didactic purpose for the reader as well, showing us how the Culture justifies itself as an interventionist utopia. Thinking through how Gurgeh was used—played—by the Culture Minds, this final section thinks through how the Culture’s manipulation of its own citizens *and* other societies squares up to its commitment to ensuring that “nothing and no one is exploited”—and so determines what distinguishes this critical utopia’s social order from the exploitative relations of emergent neoliberalism in the reader’s own lifeworld.

While the 1979 draft of the novel imagines the Culture as a radical *negation* of those relations, the published draft imagines instead a vibrant *alternative* that, while couched in the technological wonders of sf futurity, is still grounded in the mundane pleasures familiar in the present. In its movement from a refusal and performative negation of heteronormative capitalist relations towards an emphasis on the utopian

potential of everyday queer relationality, Banks's revision of *The Player of Games* roughly analogous to the tension between anti-relational and utopian tendencies in Queer theory with Muñoz maps in *Cruising Utopia*.

In the Culture Banks imagines a post-scarcity society practicing fully automated queer luxury space communism. In this scenario, the critical question, as John Maynard Keynes envisioned, would be how best to occupy oneself in a state of “freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest have won... to live wisely and agreeably and well” (366-7). In each of the manuscript drafts, Gurgeh's discontent derives from his difficulty answering Keynes's challenge—a difficulty rooted in his atavistic attachment to capitalist and patriarchal modes of meaning-making. He is unable to imagine “ends” for his actions, and without a sense of futurity his life in the Culture is a hollow pursuit of meaningless pleasures.

The 1979 draft largely affirms Gurgeh's diagnosis. The Culture's post-scarcity luxury capitalism is unambiguously superior to life under capitalism, but it is also marked by a sense of mourning for affects of “seriousness” and “maturity” that have no place in a society dedicated to hedonism and perpetual youth. The only consolation to be found is in the reminder that capitalism and heterosexuality had so corrupted these concepts that they are not worth holding onto. Despite its genuine enthusiasm for the hedonistic pleasures the Culture normalizes, and its unflinching distaste for the exploitation that undergirds both individual and social structures in Western capitalism, the 1979 draft nonetheless does not imagine a form of identity or futurity *outside* of heteromale capitalism. Abolishing that wretched system means sacrificing access to futurity and identity *in toto*.

Early in the '79 draft, Gurgeh reflects on his dissatisfaction with that sacrifice: “he wanted something this society could not give him, but he could not live outside it. He was stuck. He wished that he could feel resigned, but all he felt was saddened” (1979 Ms. pg 30). Gurgeh expresses a fundamentally conservative horror at the way the Culture has dissolved traditional Western social norms, even as he acknowledges the moral and practical superiority of the new order of meaningless plenitude and pleasure. This framing of the Culture as a force of rupture is resonant with Lee Edelman’s description of queerness as a “pulsative force of negativity” constituted against heteronormative systems of meaning and identity. The anxieties Gurgeh feels in the '79 draft echo Edelman’s description of queer sexualities’ “opposition to [the] underlying structure of the political [...] the governing fantasy of achieving Symbolic closure through the marriage of identity to futurity in order to realize the social subject” (*No Future* 14). As we will examine in more detail below, Gurgeh’s primary discontents in this draft hinge on the failure of two of the primary processes Edelman identifies for marrying “identity to futurity”: individual identity is unmoored by the failure of generational bonds, in the death of Gurgeh’s “father” and his own failure to become a father through procreation. At the same time, sociopolitical meaning is dissolved by the AIs’ benign but total administration of society. In the '79 draft the Culture embraces the negativity and jouissance Edelman identifies with the queer. It normalizes and universalizes a queerness of immediacy, pleasure, excess, and cheerful transgression of hetero-norms—norms whose ghostly persistence those transgressions depend on to signify. The “lesson” Gurgeh learns in this draft, which he shares with his friends in the final act, is not a new

way to construct meaning and identity, but rather a simple movement from sadness to resignation in the face of the Culture's meaningless, futureless pleasures: "if there is [a fault] it's in me, and I'm just glad I have friends who can like me despite it" (1979 Ms. pg 248).

In contrast, the published text presents the culture as a fully functional alternative social order, a vibrant queer lifeworld in which all subjects (human, machinic, and virtual) are able to craft diverse but real meanings for themselves, their desires, and their participation in the Culture as a collective social project. This queer lifeworld is communicated less through the novel's inclusion of queer sexuality and technologically-enhanced gender fluidity among the many "freedoms" taken for granted by the Culture's citizens, than by the various networks of affective relations Gurgeh moves through in the novel. Much of Banks's revision went towards perfecting his representation of these networks. The result is what Simone Caroti calls "one of the more remarkable aspects of the novel: the plausible, credible, sustained description of day-to-day life in paradise" (73). In its emphasis on the day-to-day, building paradise out mundane interactions and relationships, the published text rejects what Muñoz calls the "romances of the negative" that structured the '79 draft, and imagines instead a future where the utopian moments of queer relationality that Muñoz identifies in the poetry of Frank O'Hara and James Schuyler—the fleeting "mode of exhilaration in which one views a restructured sociality" (*Cruising Utopia* 6-7)—becomes the dominant mode of experience. In the published text, meaning is not lost, but instead is glimpsed everywhere "in utopian bonds,

affiliations, designs, and gestures that exist within the present moment” (*Cruising Utopia* 22).

As in the 1979 draft, Gurgeh’s discontent stems from his atavistic attachment to capitalist modes of heteronormative identity formation. In the published text, the crux of the crisis is not anxiety about reproductive futurity, but rather his embrace of the neoliberal impulse to entrepreneurialize the self. In a Culture dedicated facilitating Shaviro’s utopian self-cultivation, Gurgeh insists on developing his self as capital. But the competition through which capital justifies and multiplies itself no longer has any real meaning within the Culture. Gurgeh finds some limited satisfaction by simulating capitalist competition in games, but his attempt to extend his gaming practices into his social relationships—to follow financial ontology’s injunction that competition should structure all endeavors—severs him from the utopian abundance of the affective networks around him. In this draft, accelerating his competitive drives through immersion in the capitalist hell of Azad teaches him a very different lesson than the one he learned in the 1979 draft. Here he realizes he must renounce the false wisdom of finance ontology, and accept that while competition and speculation have real utility they must be wisely and *narrowly* applied. When he ceases to “game” his relationships, in the final pages, he regains access to the web of affect and queerly utopian relationality that always surrounded him.

Only after his immersion in Azadian culture, in which scarcity and competition structure all relations, can Gurgeh truly grasp that the “post-scarcity” Culture provides not just *material* abundance, but *affective* abundance as well. Love and meaning are not

scarce resources to be battled over, won and lost, because in the Culture they are joyously, deliriously overproduced. In contrast to the spiritual starvation of Azad—and by only slight extension, the present—the Culture takes on some of the queer utopian valence Muñoz finds in Jill Johnston’s “casting of a picture of the future she calls intermedia”:

No end to what there can be an end of in the great reintegration: the intermedia of the cosmic village; the intermedia of the genealogy of a vast prolific dream; the intermedia of language as the gurgling of happy infants; *the intermedia of hordes of artists (all the people) making sand castles and other inanities inside and outside of their heads, or doing nothing at all*. Intermedia is the world before and after we chop it up into bits and pieces and stash it away in a filing cabinet labeled MINE, YOURS, THEIRS (qtd in *Cruising Utopia* 125-6, my emphasis)

Johnston’s vision of “all the people” free to “make sand castles and other inanities inside and outside their heads” in a “vast prolific dream” captures the sense of inexhaustible creative and affective surplus that undelays all the other wonders in the published version of *The Player of Games*.

As Shaviro argues in *No Speed Limit*, it is difficult for us living in the scarcity relations of capitalist realism to take such affective abundance seriously (55). In *The Player of Games*, Gurgeh initially shares our difficulty imagining the abundance that surrounds him. But by accelerating the capitalist investments that create that difficulty, “push[ing] it to its last dregs, follow[ing] it to its furthest and strangest consequences,” the narrative pushes Gurgeh to the realization that he must willingly sacrifice the heteromasculine identity he built from competition and human capital in order to embrace—and be embraced by—the queer networks of abundance that lie just beyond capitalist realism’s horizons of perception.

This narrative of queer accelerationism, in which Gurgeh must pull up his masculine identity by the roots of competition and enforced scarcity to access a world of queer abundance, is the challenge Banks throws in the face of Thatcherism in *The Player of Games*. It is Banks's depiction of the Culture interior and its thriving queer life-worlds, not the hyper-capitalist hellworld of Azad, that Banks honed during the revision process, and it is precisely in its *positivity* about the Culture's utopian promises of queer relationality and self-cultivation that Banks's most radical critique of neoliberalism within this particular historical juncture lies. Against the steady drumbeat of "there is no alternative," *The Player of Games* uses Gurgeh's transformation to insist on what Muñoz calls a "a queerness to come, a way of being in the world that is glimpsed through reveries in a quotidian life that challenges ... the force field of the present (*Cruising Utopia* 25).

5.4 A Future without Futurity: Negating Capitalism in the 1979 Draft

In the 1979 draft, the primary object of critique explored by Bank's critical utopia was the limitation of European social democracy as a utopian project. This version of *PoG* sought to probe the flaws and limitations within a project to which it was still very much sympathetic. I argue that the accelerationist narrative in the 1979 draft consists of extending the worst tendencies Banks detected in both capitalism and social democracy and comparing the end results, to show that even in the worst case scenario a soulless-numbing, meaningless decadence is superior to the deliberately *soul-crushing* nightmare of capitalism. In this profoundly negative approach, the text itself seems to authorize the most cynical view of the Culture—the sole consolation being that it is still better than the

alternative. We can see the 1979 draft, then, as an extended ironic rejoinder to Churchill's famous quip that democracy (by which, of course, he meant capitalism) "is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." In the 1979 *PoG*, the Culture is the worst system... except for all the others—a set including not only the Azad, but the "real" world of 1970s Western Europe and America.¹²

Looking back today, when the tides of neoliberalism have eroded so much of the social democratic project, it might be hard to understand Banks's strategy of damning with faint praise here. But it is important to remember the very different zeitgeist within which Banks problematized the utopian potential of contemporary social democracy. Situating Foucault's *Birth of Biopolitics* lectures—given at the same time Banks was composing his early Culture material—Brown reminds us that

While students of neoliberalism in the 1970s and early 1980s grasped the importance of neoliberal economic experiments in parts of Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, they rarely detected its presence back in the metropole. The "Washington Consensus" affirming free-market policies over Keynesian ones was still more than a decade off. Thatcher and Reagan had not yet come to power. European Welfare States still appeared to be *the beacon and the future of the civilized West, and the question for most was not how to defend them, but whether they could be pushed further toward—or beyond—social democracy.* (*Undoing* 51, my emphasis)

With this context in mind, we can see many instances in the manuscript where Banks, like Foucault, seems to intuit aspects of neoliberalism that were not yet "full-blown or hegemonic, but merely whispering [their] emergence" in '79—some bordering

¹² While I argue that in the subsequent revisions, Banks pivoted away from negative approach, we can clearly see its traces in the published texts he began composing during this period, particularly the short stories in *State of the Art*.

on eerie prescience, such as the way his depiction of a third “apex” gender in Azadian society presages Thatcher’s performances of dominance-as-gender. Yet we discover many other places where Banks’s critiques of permissive social democracy anticipate neoliberal lines of attack. In particular, the text’s mourning for the heteronormative family as the basic unit of social meaning exposes the point at which the unholy alliance neoliberal and neoconservative forces would be forged.

Despite his oft-avowed sympathies with communist and communitarian values, Banks is, at heart, a liberal humanist. One of the most consistent sources of contradiction and struggle, across all of Banks’s work, is the tension between the appeal he sees in collectivism, and his deep-seated attachment to individualism. A subtitle for most Banks novels—sf and non-sf alike—could be “at what cost can the individual be saved?” This question takes on very different political stakes between 1979 and 1988. The Thatcher regime enforced its answer to that question (At Any Cost!) in policy long before she famously put it into words in 1987:

I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it. 'I have a problem, I'll get a grant.' 'I'm homeless, the government must house me.' They're casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then, also to look after our neighbor. People have got the entitlements too much in mind, without the obligations. There's no such thing as entitlement, unless someone has first met an obligation. (Keay 1987)

Thatcher’s blithely chilling encomium to atomization here follows almost exactly the same lines as Banks’s critique of the Culture as decadent social democracy in the 1979

draft—with the effect of foreclosing much of the value that critique had in its moment of composition.

In the rest of this section, I will examine key points in which the 1979 draft, in which Gurgeh measures the Culture’s freedoms and pleasures against the loss of values that would later become central to Thatcher’s regime: individual, family, and social obligation. For Gurgeh, their loss leads to a larger failure, the collapse of what Edelman called “the governing fantasy of achieving Symbolic closure through the marriage of identity to futurity in order to realize the social subject” (*No Future* 14). The 1979 Draft is a narrative of exhaustion, inertia, and desperation. Gurgeh’s dissatisfaction with Culture life turns on feelings of personal, social, and political futility, on the inability to identify *ends* that would give his actions a sense of futurity and “objective” meaning. With no way to make a lasting “mark” on the future, he feels adrift in an eternal present of transitory distraction. In the end, the negation of capitalism’s injustices is cynically judged sufficient reward in itself: an empty freedom is still better than capitalist subjectivity and futurity.

5.4.1 Sterile Excess and the Failure of Intimate Meaning

The first section of the ’79 draft, detailing Gurgeh life inside the Culture, rapidly establishes that his social maladjustment is tied up in a crisis within Culture society, a crisis of what Edelman calls “reproductive futurity”, one that entangles the novels’ concerns with individual identity and familial relations. Both erotic and familial relationships fail to provide Gurgeh with future-oriented ends for his present actions, and so he withdraws from both.

As in the later drafts, the drone Chamlis and woman Yay serve as Gurgeh's primary interlocutors and foils, conduits through which we explore the emotional topography of his life. They are particularly important in the 1979 draft, as the socially withdrawn Gurgeh seems to have no other friendships or intimate relationships. In their characterization, Chamlis and Yay are largely the same as they appear in the published draft. The machine-entity Chamlis is an autonomous droid citizen, with approximately human intelligence. It has been around much longer than Gurgeh, and serves as a kind of mentor figure to him. Though the drone has no human gender, its social performance often follows the scripts of the "older gay confidant," one of the many implicitly queer aspects of the text.¹³

Yay's character is also close to that which appears in the published version. She is portrayed as *very* young, much younger than both Gurgeh and Chamlis, still in the process of exploring life within the Culture. She retains affects of novelty and wonder that both Gurgeh and Chamlis seem to have aged out of. In sharp contrast to the published text, though, the 1979 version of Yay is not an object of desire for Gurgeh. The 1979 version of Gurgeh is exceptional in the Cultural because he is unable to get over a lost love. In the wake of a failed relationship and a messy divorce, this Gurgeh has become passive, withdrawn and pointedly asexual—a far cry from the assertively masculine, possessively sexual figure of the published text. Rather than an object of

¹³ There are some resemblances between Gurgeh and Chamlis's relationship and the one between Bron and Lawrence in Samuel R. Delany's *Trouble on Triton* (1975). Like Lawrence, Chamlis serves as an older gay confidant to a neurotic heterosexual man, though this resemblance in the characters' starting positions does not extend the trajectories they take through their respective stories.

desire, the 1979 draft's version of Yay serves as a device for linking the Culture's social and sexual norms to her position of physical and mental youth.

This is well illustrated by the scene where Yay and Gurgeh encounter a young man named Shora, who is a gamefan of Gurgeh's and an object of Yay's own lust:

Two men stood just beyond Yay, hand-in-hand [...] Yay gestured from Gurgeh to the young man.

"Gurgeh; Shora. Shora's not much to look at, but he's good in bed."

[Commenting later on the two men's' relationship, Yay says] "Young love. I wouldn't mind, but love makes people boring; they don't have time for anybody else."

Gurgeh smiled, first at Yay using the word "young," then when he said "are you envious?"

"oh yes!" she laughed, "no; I've been in love, so I know what it feels like... and I don't think I'd like to be in love with Shora, he's too good looking--it would probably last far too long. But I always think it's a pity when people pair off like that. I'm against it on principle."

"Well, it suits some people" Gurgeh replies.

(1979 Ms., 35-36)¹⁴

First, it is important to note that this scene is typical of Banks's depiction of queer *sexuality* across his work: same sex couples/coupling is a normal part of the Culture world, and neither the narrator nor the characters bat an eye. What is marked and remarked upon here is not the *two men* in the relationship, but rather the long-term and exclusive nature of that relationship. Shora's erotic life is notable not because it is queer, but because it is *monogamous*. The published version of this scene serves to highlight Gurgeh's pride and sexual jealousy: *he* wants "win" Yay's "scarce" affections by maneuvering her into a similarly exclusive arrangement. But in the 1979 draft, Shora's

¹⁴ While I was privileged to examine the manuscripts held by the University of Sterling, I was not allowed make photographs or photocopies during my visit. The quoted passages here come from my transcriptions, and so I cannot guarantee their fidelity down to the character level.

youthful experiment with monogamy serves instead to contrast Gurgeh's outmoded commitment such exclusive erotic relationships with Yay's valorization of a hookup culture figured both as explicitly adolescent, and as explicitly transient.

For Yay, the futurity implied in romantic commitment is unsexy and "boring." In the disapprovingly tolerant tone of Yay's reaction to Shora (I wouldn't mind, but [...] it's a pity [...] I'm against it on principle") we can detect a normative pressure that *others* Shora's monogamy and figures it as deviant, perverse, and potentially socially disruptive—reminiscent of the othering of queer desire by heteronormativity. Yay frames her disapproval in the language of opportunity cost: when people "pair off" "they don't have time for anybody else." Ironically, then, in the 1979 draft long term, exclusive sexual relationships are suspect because they prevent one from participating in the Culture's deliriously excessive polymorphously perversion, the normalization of which is one of the Culture's most celebrated utopian transgressions of our world's repressive heteronorms. Not only do the monogamous deny *themselves* access to the excessive pleasures of the moment to pursue a limiting futurity, in doing so they *rob others* of the pleasure to which they might have contributed. When you aren't having sex with everybody, this logic seems to argue, everybody is losing out.

While this encounter aligns the Culture's sexual practices, through Yay, with a kind of short-sighted youthful restlessness, later we find even old Chamli's drone is getting stoned and having group sex: "I've been letting a few strong currents go to a few odd places, yes, but what of it? I just happened to be in Thrall with a couple of chums at the time" (MP 38). By showing characters across the age spectrum in similarly diffuse

forms of erotic behavior, the '79 draft shows us that within the normative sexual culture of the Culture, physical age and sexual experience are delinked from the heteronormative teleology of “maturity” and “responsibility”—which can accommodate plenty of youthful “experimentation” with different partners and experiences as long as it is framed as a *future-directed* search for both one’s “true” sexual identity and a single “true” partner that corresponds to it, “discoveries” which bring experimentation to an end and form the foundation for a stable “mature” identity.

Yet Shora’s “young love,” however dismissive Yay is to it, shows that monogamous relations do exist within the Culture. As Gurgeh insists, “it suits some people.” Even those who choose to buck the Culture’s norms and build something like a conventional monogamous sexual identity, though, run up against a subtler challenge than the knowledge that they are missing out on a sex bonanza: the pressure longevity puts on heteronormative futurity. Gurgeh’s experience in the 1979 draft shows how the passage of time, as much as the fear of death, channels heteronormative projects of identity formation towards the need to procreate.

The 1979 Gurgeh is *divorced*: he progressed far enough through the narrative of maturity to discover his “true” partner and establish an identity upon his relationship with her, only to lose both. The reason for that loss speaks directly to Edelman’s diagnosis of heteronormative culture in *No Future*: although Gurgeh and his wife Cho were together for decades, their union failed to produce a child, and so culminate the psychosexual trajectory of heteronormativity. As Edelman argues, within straight capitalist ideology, the futurity of the mythical Child ultimately guarantees the validity and stability not only

of the heteromascuine subject as “father,” but society as a whole: “the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order” (*No Future* 11). Edelman argues that the figure of the Child serves to “prop [up] the secular theology on which our social reality rests [by securing] the meaning of our collective narratives and our collective narratives of meaning” (*No Future* 12). This mythical Child exercises a “coercive universalization” that impregnates all dimensions of personal and political futurity with latent heteronormative assumptions (*No Future* 11). This is exactly the case in the 1979 draft. Gurgeh’s anxieties about his failure to secure reproductive futurity infect every other aspect of the novel, so that failure of the Child becomes the defining failure of the Culture within the narrative.

Very early in the 1979 draft, Gurgeh reminisces about his relationship with Cho. They were married for decades, and it is clear from their interactions that Gurgeh’s sense of identity is still entangled with their relationship despite its recent end. Yet when he meets with her—as he does several times in the early part of the novel—he is totally unable to express any passion or feeling for her, as she presses him to do. It is strongly implied that this emotional distance was the cause of their break-up. Indeed, she still seems invested in their exclusivity, expressing some jealousy towards Yay. “Are you screwing her?” Cho asks.¹⁵ “No,” Gurgeh replies, “we just play games. You know me; I’d rather do that than screw anybody.” The emotional (and implicitly physical) impotence which ruined their marriage lingers between them, an impotence somehow connected to

¹⁵ I found the verb “screwing,” which is used throughout the 1979 draft, very off-putting—it struck me as a distinctly un-Culture way to describe sex. In the published draft, as in the rest of the Culture novels to my recollection, people don’t screw, they fuck. My intuition here is that there is a lot of latent heteromascuine baggage in screw, connotations of both male-centric exploitation (“she got screwed”) and prurient, scandalized voyeurism that don’t make sense in the unsublimated sexual milieu of the Culture.

the failure of their union to produce children, reported in passing in the following extraordinary passage:

He remembered with some distaste when, fifty years or so ago, not long after they first met, he had been thinking of having a child, and Changed, became a woman over the course of the year or so it took the sex-change virus to take complete effect; Cho had thought it was a good idea to change too, and so had become a man. She had been an odd-looking man, too. Gurgeh had stayed as a woman for a couple of years, decided he did not want a child after all, and changed back. Cho changed too. (1979 Ms., 21)

What, exactly, happened here? Did Gurgeh's desire for a child fade *because* he transitioned to a female embodiment? Is the desire to secure reproductive futurity linked to masculine subjectivity? Did he lose interest because Cho was a less attractive partner as a man? Exactly which part of this memory triggers his sense of "distaste?"¹⁶ It's difficult to identify a reason for this failure within Gurgeh and Cho's relationship, because although the ghost of this lost child continues to haunt the narrative, the episode is never explicitly mentioned again. However, Edelman argues that because of the "coercive Universality" of the reproductive imperative, blame for this failure spills beyond Gurgeh's defective, impotent masculine subjectivity to implicate the queer sensuality of the Culture at large.

In his examination of P.D. James's *The Children of Men*, Edelman argues that within "pro-procreative ideology 'if there is a baby, there is a future, there is redemption.' If, however, there is *no baby* and in consequence, *no future*, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic [non-procreative] enjoyments understood as inherently

¹⁶ It's unclear if Gurgeh's "distaste" was directed at his brief female embodiment, his desire for children, or the ultimate failure of that desire. Considering his commitment to cismale embodiment in later drafts, it is striking that he changed at all here.

destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself” (*No Future* 13). Within the Straight prenatal logic exemplified by James’s novel, Edelman argues, “the biological fact of heterosexual procreation bestows the imprimatur of meaning-production on heterogenital relations,” with the corollary that, as the narrator of *The Children of Men* states, “sex totally divorced from procreation [becomes] almost meaninglessly acrobatic” (*No Future* 13). The failure to produce a child indicates a failure to produce meaning, meaning that despite the duration of Gurgeh and Cho’s relationship (almost 50 years), they never managed to build a *future* together. Stuck in a persistently “meaningless” perpetual present, their time together never attained the meaning of a *history together*. They produced nothing but “sterile, narcissistic enjoyments,” and this feeling of sterility came to dominate Gurgeh’s identity and his understanding of the Culture. Haunted by the ghost of the Child, Gurgeh withdraws from Culture’s non-procreative pleasures which, “in the absence of futurity [seem] empty, substitutive, pathological,” its excesses “meaninglessly acrobatic” (*No Future* 12-13). Indeed, because the sensual pleasures of excess are repressed within Straight Christian culture in the name of the Child whose sacred innocence might be sullied by contact with them, as Edelman argues, the Culture’s exuberant public transgressions of those norms demands the eradication of the Child—and so, implicitly, the sacrifice of *Gurgeh’s child* to the project of collective jouissance.

Reading the 1979 draft through Edelman’s psychoanalytic framework, we can see that just as the Culture has banished the repressive Father-function that might seek to regulate its pursuit of pleasure, Gurgeh loses access to the masculine performance of

fatherhood, and so to the affects of “maturity” and “responsibility” that inhere in it. It should come as little surprise then, that another key scene present in the 1979 draft but absent from the published one is the death and funeral of a literal Father figure, an elderly man who, other than Cho, is Gurgeh’s only conventional “family” connection in the novel. The funeral sequence, in which Gurgeh returns to his ancestral home to see the dying patriarch, drives home the no-future theme of this draft.¹⁷ Just as it is no place for The Child, the Culture is no country for Old Men in the ’79 draft.

Gurgeh’s resentment of the Culture’s Childlessness—and thus its essential futurelessness—leads to a text that is closer to *Logan’s Run* than *Triton*. Gurgeh expresses a sense of maturing impatience with adolescent pleasures, couched in a creeping mistrust of the automated mall-state that provisions them. The hedonistic life of ease and plentitude the Minds’ administration makes possible may be pleasing to the young—and the young at heart, like old Chamlis—but Gurgeh is figured as somehow both too jaded *and* too earnest to forge an identity out of the sterile, directionless dalliances the Culture offers.

5.4.2 Impotent Adventure and the Foreclosure of Heroic Masculinity

As in *Logan’s Run*, in the 1979 draft the deficiencies in the Culture’s intimate relations are linked to the automation of society—which further complicates matters when Gurgeh ultimately tries to make up for the lack of meaning in his intimate relations by attempting to make *political* meaning through heroic masculine adventure instead.

Appealing to the AI’s that run Culture society, Gurgeh asks them to find him a challenge,

¹⁷ Banks’s description of Culture funeral rites in “A Few Notes on the Culture” follows the details of this scene closely enough I suspect some of the ‘79 text was repurposed there.

one that will not only stimulate him in the moment, but will allow him to define a stable masculine identity through the lasting “mark” he makes on the course of the Culture’s collective development. In the course of this adventure, Gurgeh’s affects of exhaustion and impotence at the micro level of interpersonal intimacy are linked to larger anxieties about autonomy and masculine virility invoked at the sociopolitical level—anxieties which scholars like Jeffords have linked to the class and race politics of neoliberalism’s emergence in the 1970s and 1980s. Here, Banks’s concerns with individualism and its imbrication with capitalist tropes of social “obligation” and scarcity come sharply into view. Thatcher’s maxim that every (sufficiently masculine) subject must “earn” their place in society through their demonstrable contributions to material and social production loses all meaning in a fully administered luxury society.

Gurgeh finds the political structure of the Culture as hostile to individual meaning-making as its intimate milieu is. On one hand, the Culture’s massive population dilutes his sense of social and political agency—he cannot imagine a way his actions could mark him out among the trillions. This is, in a sense, an issue of overproduction of agency, which he sees as having the perverse effect of devaluing it to the vanishing point. He laments that despite the minor celebrity he has achieved through his knack for games, he has not *distinguished himself*, because all Culture citizens have the freedom and leisure to cultivate such expertise in any field they wish. Further, the sheer scope of the Culture’s collective capacity for attention makes it functionally impossible to “corner the

market” on recognition. How does one become more than a “minor” celebrity in such a society, prominent enough to define one’s value on the basis of lasting public regard?¹⁸

On the other hand, Gurgeh is very aware that drones and Minds do all the meaningful work of directing the Culture’s destiny. The human agents they might deputize along the way are ultimately incidental. This anxiety is absolutely authorized by the text in the 1979 draft. Discussing his desire for adventure with the drone Contact sends to recruit him, Gurgeh laments that even in Contact’s interactions with other civilizations, drones and Minds do the important work of planning and management. The drone replies that “it is possible for the individual to have a *marked effect*, even a quite crucial influence, on most important situations” (1979 Ms., 27 my emphasis). Unable to access futurity through his private life, Gurgeh longs to make such a lasting “marked effect” on his society in order to achieve a kind of sociopolitical futurity which would ground his identity in heroism instead. In doing so, Gurgeh would live up to his masculine assumption that, as Thatcher put it, he can’t comfortably lay claim to the Culture’s pleasurable “entitlements” until he can demonstrate through such “marked effect” that he had “met an obligation.”

Even in the drone’s seeming defense of human agency, though, the scope of action is confined to the boundaries, to outwardly-directed actions far from the Orbital milieu Gurgeh belongs to. The drone resists Gurgeh’s attempts to romanticize both these exceptional outsiders and the agency they seem to achieve:

¹⁸ In several later Culture texts, Banks does discuss the influence that celebrities can have, but even when millions or even billions are swayed by an individual’s choices, that represents only a fraction of the Culture’s citizenry. Just as the 1979 Ms.’s version of Gurgeh turns away from all sexual contact once he realizes it will fail to secure him the stable identity he desires, he also disavows the celebrity.

[Drone] "The people--the humans, that is--who have the most effect on the Culture's behalf, are hardly ever born to it, but that is the result of our very civilization..."

[Gurgeh:] "Oh, mercenaries?"

"That's an old word, sir, as inaccurate in describing them as "drone" is, used to describe something like myself"

"I've also heard them called Heroes."

The drone's field became very slightly rosy. "We prefer truth to heroes, Mr. Gurgeh. They are unusual people, not like you or I, but they are our representatives. They are only good because they are being used by us. Intrinsically, they are simply arch-adventurers. But we digress." (1979 Ms., 28)

Even when the drone seems to confirm his fears that human action's only meaning is derived from the Minds' direction, Gurgeh readily accepts the drone's offer to look for some situation where he could be so "used." Looking back on their conversation later, he feels embarrassed.

[Gurgeh] didn't doubt what [the drone] had said about people having a great effect on things, but he knew and the drone knew that he was not that type. *He was a pampered product of a hedonistic society*, and for all the inherited improvements to his body he had, the most human-basic of those mercenaries would be ten times more likely to survive *when things got tough*. Chamlis was right, he wanted something this society could not give him, but he could not live outside it. He was stuck. He wished that he could feel resigned, but all he felt was saddened" (1979 Ms., 30 my emphasis)

This is the boilerplate masculine anxiety that underlies so much genre-production aimed at Western male audiences: the worry that peace and comfort, while clearly goods in themselves, produce "soft" feminized subjects unlikely to survive "if things got tough"—reproducing a romanticized nostalgia for exactly such "tough" situations and the violence they afford. This familiar anxiety complex is exacerbated in the Culture, not only by its production of a fantastic superabundance that makes *all struggle* obsolete, but by the failure of domestic and intimate forms of identify formation associated with reproductive futurity. The only semblance of masculine identity formation left, the only opportunity to

engage in sexy, masculine-tinged competence-scarcity contests, is reserved for Contact. Not only is the dynamism and adventure at the Culture's periphery failing to percolate down to the Homefront of Orbital life, but only a maladjusted subject like Gurgeh still desires it.

Contact, then, maintains a monopoly on the last vestiges of conventionally masculine modes of meaning-making in the Culture. Interacting with other Cultures puts them back into the situations of material and ethical precarity where traditional masculine performances can signify: they must enter the kinds of competitive struggles for hierarchical outcomes the Culture has so efficiently designed out of its own social processes. In the Culture's interior Contact's dangerously masculinized personnel (let alone the cowboy operatives of SC) are spoken of in hushed, ominous terms. On one hand, their methods and the ethos, once infected by masculine drives for domination, are profoundly othered from normal life and normal social conduct, to the extent that calling upon them as Gurgeh does is akin making a deal with the devil, as shown by Chamlis's repeated warnings.

[Chamlis to Yay] "It occurred to me that in all the dealings I've ever had with Contact, one thing has always happened: I've been used. I always seemed to end up lower on the self-respect scale than when I started. I don't want that to happen to Gurgeh. That's all... you can choose to go or you can choose not to go, but you can't choose to go and not be used. Don't think of outplaying them." (1979 Ms., 38)

[Chamlis to Gurgeh] "I think [Contact] may want to humiliate you. They may want to teach you a lesson because we dared to ask them to find something equal to your talents" (1979 Ms., 55)

Yet even though he seems destined to be used—"screwed"—if he falls under their power, Gurgeh is nonetheless drawn inexorably to *any* experience of such masculine power. He

wants to be in on the meaning-making processes of history, even if only as a pawn. Indeed, despite Chamlis's injunction against aspiring to "outplay" the Minds, the prospect of a participating in "real competition," with serious personal and political, as well as material and emotional stakes, exhilarates Gurgeh. He is thrilled to compete with the barbaric Azadians, who "gamble things that mean so much to them. They're still in touch with their own animalism, they still use the old brute cunning" (1979 Ms., 56). But even more, he warms to the idea of matching wits with the puppet masters of Contact:

I do believe I could go there and do much better than Contact expect. I know I've never really stretched myself Chamlis, I know I've always been to easily contented, just taken what there was, never been ambitious. Well, what's the point, after all. But here, here there's something more. They did all we asked of them, Contact I mean. They've found a society I couldn't live in, with a game that will let me live. I know I can go there and do it; I'll play their game of life! (1979 Ms., 56)

Gurgeh enters his adventure as a tool of the Contact Minds, but also as their rival in a larger struggle: to make the meaning of his actions exceed precorporation by the Mind's plans for him.

5.4.3 Into the Azad, or, Much Ado about Nothing

The opening section of the 1979 draft sets up its interrogation of the Culture's utopian promise by staging crises of heteromasculine identity and social meaning production. At both the intimate level of erotic life, and the macro scale of politics, Gurgeh's struggles to establish a stable identity in a society where individual actions and desires have no grounding in traditional Western narratives of futurity. Yet the two major instances of this crisis are only indirectly related within the 1979 draft. While Gurgeh's failure to procreate is implicitly connected to the Culture's overprovision of both material

security and sexual opportunity, these issues are only tenuously connected to Gurgeh's specialization as a game-player, and thus to his desire to "outplay" both the Azadians and Contact in the second act. The competitive drive at the root of both capitalism and heteronormative masculinity remains a structuring absence in this draft.

This lack of connection carries over into the second section, which contains the "action" and drama of the narrative. In the 1979 draft, the Azadian section serves only two functions beyond the pleasure it affords as an adventure yarn. First, it serves as a tour through the worst of what capitalist society has to offer. As Simone Caroti argues, in his depiction of Azadian society Banks figures capitalism as "a show of horrors" filled with "appalling examples of exploitation and unholy suffering [...] the sum total of which [...] paint a composite image of [the] nearly unbearable ferocity" at the heart of capitalism. Caroti's appraisal of Azad in the published text applies here because almost every aspect of Azad's capitalist horror show was established in the 1979 draft, and only lightly revised in the published text. Thus, it is actually somewhat anachronistic to claim, as many do, that Azad is a direct satirical or critical response to Thatcherite Britain. But it should come as little surprise that when Banks *accelerated* capitalism's "unbearable ferocity,"—pushing it towards "it most extreme point, follow[ing] it to its furthest and strangest consequences" (Shaviro)—that the result would be "an intricate system of dog-eat-dog viciousness surpassing even the legendary horrors of ... the barbaric era of Thatcher" (Langford, 264).¹⁹

¹⁹ I suspect Azad was actually inspired by Banks's trip to America in 1978, during which he first conceived the outline of *PoG*. Paul Kincaid specifically notes that the setting for the novel's conclusion came to Banks during a road trip through Texas (*Banks*, 8), but it is tempting to speculate that the overall arc of the story—a discontented idealist discovers that his visit to a capitalist dystopia reconciles him somewhat to the

The details of Gurgeh's Azadian adventure don't ultimately matter very much in the 1979 draft. Despite the intricate and often disturbing detailed presentation of accelerated capitalism's depravity and moral bankruptcy, it is only tenuously connected to the philosophical dilemmas staged by the first section's acceleration of sexual liberation within the administrated welfare state. The two are placed in opposition, but don't really interact. Gurgeh's struggles to beat the Azadians at their own game make for a fun adventure, but Gurgeh doesn't appreciably grow or change in the course of the story, and we don't learn anything about the Culture or Contact that might *change the terms* of Gurgeh's relationships as they were laid out in the first section.

The climax of the action does provide us with a *clearer* view of the ruthlessness that lurks within Contact's own methodology, even if it doesn't change our understanding of the moral or ethical character of their actions. During the final match of the tournament on Azad, facing off against their Emperor, Gurgeh comes to realize that the way he has been playing the complex strategy game echoes the Minds' overall approach to administering the Culture. Through this connection, the 1979 draft implies that the Minds' perspective is sublimely beautiful, but also cold and terrible. On one hand, Gurgeh tries to conscientiously value his pieces "as individual units," and to "save pieces" whenever possible—in pointed contrast to the "ruthlessness" with which his opponent the Azadian "Emperor treated his own pieces, which Gurgeh thought was a taunt; a tactic designed to upset [Gurgeh] and what [Emperor] Nicosar doubtless regarded as his 'soft' morality and 'sensitive' feelings" (1979 Ms., 214). Ultimately, though, in the

limitations of his own social democratic welfare society—might have been inspired by the Scotsman's experience in America.

push to win, “pieces were more than people and the board greater than any planet, any orbital, and ring” (1979 Ms., 219). Like the Contact Minds, Gurgeh’s effort to treat his pieces nicely doesn’t change the fact that he is using them as *means towards an end that exists beyond them*. In this draft, his strategy ultimately defaults to neoliberal instrumentality in the end.

This insight into the Minds’ perspective prepares Gurgeh for the moment when his handler Flere-Imsaho reveals that just like the Contact mercenaries discussed earlier in the novel, both the content and the meaning of Gurgeh’s actions were wholly determined by the Contact Minds whose pawn he remained:

"Manipulated," Gurgeh repeated, and gave a sharp exhalation of breath, somewhere between a sob and a laugh.
[Flere-Imsaho replied] "I'm sorry about that, Gurgeh, but yes [...] We had your manipulation down to a fine art [...] just hints, little shocks, but ones I had been told would send you off on the right track each time. I must say, my respect for those great minds which play with the likes of you and me has increased considerably.
(1979 Ms., 240)

Gurgeh’s anxieties from act one, then, are not complicated or challenged, but simply vindicated at the end of the novel. Crushed, he returns home to Chamlis and Yay. In the manuscripts final pages, he tells them that during the long trip "I thought about how all those Minds must have been laughing to themselves about this pathetic human who'd not long ago finished saying 'what can one person do'" (1979 Ms., 248). Gurgeh made a difference, but his inability to claim credit for the *meaning* of that difference humiliates him. The “marked effect” belongs to the Minds.

The Culture, Gurgeh concludes, is manipulative but it *isn't* exploitative, because he was used according to his own desire. His own longing to forge meaning through competition made him the perfect tool for use.

[In the Culture] we don't shape people if we can avoid it; we just let them grow, we let them do as we like. I wanted to play games, and Azad was the ultimate game. Once I knew about it nothing could have stopped me from going, and if nobody had said anything about it until the day that I died, and then told me, I'd have cursed you and Contact for not telling me earlier and giving me the chance. You did warn me, old friend; you did your very best, but I thought I could play them all and win...." he shook his head again, smiled at the drone sadly.... well, you can't play Contact. We're like those little missiles I was shooting at that sunny day years ago with Yay here; they use us for sport, and yet they know they only let us do what we really want to. (1979 Ms., 248)

However, in securing this alibi from the charge of exploitation, the Minds cop to the larger charge of evacuating meaning from the lives of their human subjects. The forms of benevolent use Gurgeh articulates here are premised by the Minds' total knowledge of, and ultimate disposal over, the subjectivity and desires of every Culture citizen. Unlike neoliberalism, the Culture *does* give each citizen total freedom in terms of "how to craft the self of what paths to travel in life," freedom from the pressures of "competitors or parameters of success in a world of scarcity and inequality" (Brown 41). *But*, although each citizen cultivates themselves as they will, they never escape the role as human capital for use by the Minds. While the Minds don't shape their human subjects according to their strategic interests, no human subjectivity or line of action escapes the horizon of those interests. No human effort escapes pre-corporation by the strategic designs of the Minds.

This foreclosure of individual human access to sociopolitical meaning-making throws Gurgeh back into the realm of intimate relations, which his Azadian escapades did

nothing to change. Indeed, the emptiness of his quest parallels and reinforces the lack of meaning in the erotic. Just as the Culture's excessive sexuality illustrates Edelman's contention that within reproductive futurity, non-procreative sex is reduced to meaningless acrobatics, a hero's journey without heroic agency is reduced to meaningless pyrotechnics.²⁰ Like the Child and the Father, the Hero loses coherence as a structuring fantasy within the Culture.

In the final pages, Gurgeh and Chamlis both wonder if the point of the whole adventure was to teach Gurgeh "some sort of a lesson" (1979 Ms. pg 248). The lesson *for Gurgeh* amounts to little beyond Accepting His Place in Great Chain of Being and feeling grateful because The Capitalist Barbarians Have it Worse. This conclusion wouldn't surprise those critics who, in Caroti's words, "have suggested that [...] Banks's attitude towards his creation was fundamentally deconstructionist [and that] the whole notion of the Culture as a Utopia is a smokescreen deployed to hide the reality that this utopia is, in fact, every bit as imperialistic as every other society" (*Culture* 17). Like Caroti, though, I reject this deconstructionist approach. I follow Caroti in assuming that "Banks was dead serious about imagining a society one could genuinely call Utopian," and that while Banks's work could be critical and even satirical, "there was no sarcasm in it.... Banks took the genre seriously, and argued his position within it honestly" (17).

²⁰ Again, "a hero's journey without heroic agency is reduced to meaningless pyrotechnics" would serve as a succinct summary of the published text of *Consider Phlebas*, highlighting that, while Banks moved away from this negative approach in the course of revising *The Player of Games*, it is a position he thought useful to explore—though it is important to note that in *Phlebas* it is the action/adventure aspects of the space-opera genre that takes the brunt of this deconstructive assault, rather than the Utopian possibilities of the Culture's own social relations.

I believe this is the case even in the 1979 draft's profoundly negative portrait of the Culture, because while *Contact's lesson for Gurgeh* is simply that the decadence of the Culture is superior to the obscenity of capitalism, *the novel's lesson for the reader* is more complex. If we are willing to grant Brown's contention that in the late 1970s the future of European social democracy seemed secure, then we can imagine Banks feeling politically secure subjecting its tendencies to this withering accelerationist treatment in order to access what Edelman described as the right-wing conservative perspective's "greater awareness" of the "radical potential, which is to say, the radical *threat*, of queerness." The right, Edelman argues, grasps such potential "more fully than liberals, for conservatism preemptively imagines the wholesale rupturing of the social fabric" (*No Future* 14). Any Utopia worth the name presupposes such "rupturing," and it is through Gurgeh's drowning horror *as a masculine traditionalist* that the 1979s draft communicates the immensity of that rupture so viscerally.

By simultaneously embracing Gurgeh's essentially conservative masculinist investments, while at the same time *accelerating* their failure and decomposition, the '79 draft performs Edelman's injunction that "we should listen to, and even perhaps be instructed by, the readings of queer sexualities produced by the forces of reaction" whose outrage so vividly registers "the capacity of queers sexualities to figure the radical dissolution of the contract, in every sense social and Symbolic, on which the future as a putative assurance against the jouissance of the real depends [... that] queerness *should* and *must* redefine [all traditional] notions as "civil order" through a rupturing of our foundational faith in the reproduction of futurity" (16-17).

The negativity of the 1979 draft about the Culture thus serves a dual purpose in *advancing* the Culture's ability to function as a Utopian horizon for the capitalist present. First, by foregrounding Gurgeh's conservative horror at the Culture's "wholesale rupturing" of heteronormative codes of meaning-making, the '79 draft registers the visceral force of radical social relations. Second, by taking up a reactionary subject position as the starting point for its comparison between the accelerated tendencies of capitalism and social democracy, the '79 draft shows that even when conservative criticisms are granted, queer luxury space communism *still* wins out. Together, the two effects constitute a backhanded affirmation of the revolutionary possibilities of 1970s movements for sexual liberation, and of the European welfare state, from a stylistically playful idealist sympathetic to and ultimately confident in the prospects for both.

5.5 Narrative and Political Challenges in the Shadow of Reagan/Thatcher

While the 1979 draft's two-pronged negative strategy for comparing the Culture to life under capitalism made sense in the context in the late seventies, it creates both narrative and political problems that Banks moved to correct in the 1980s revisions. First, there is a sense of narrative flatness that results from locating the sources of Gurgeh's discontent in the social organization of the Culture. This means that there is no way that the "lessons" Gurgeh learns through the action of the plot can have an impact on the situation. While this sense of narrative futility reinforces the draft's strategy of political negativity, it makes for frustrating reading.

Banks's 1980s revisions to *PoG* address this structural impasse by heavily reworking the first section, reframing Gurgeh's sense of failure and futility to focus on

why Gurgeh's masculine subjectivity is incompatible with the radical equality of the Culture. The fact that utopia is inhospitable to white guys with paternity issues becomes a feature rather than a bug. If *Gurgeh is the problem*, the “lessons” he learns in the second act can be connected to the Cultural tensions developed in the first, creating a clear and unified narrative arc.

Locating the trouble within Gurgeh’s subjectivity not only fixes the 1979 drafts narrative issues, it also allows helps address the political challenges the text faced in the 1980s, by enabling a shift from an intimate politics of negation and *joissance* towards a relational queer politics of self-cultivation. Rather than simply opposing the hedonic anarchy of the Culture to conservative masculinist modes of maturity, reproductive futurity, or meaningful intimacy, as the 1979 draft does, the 1980s revisions focus instead on how the Culture makes new, more radical configurations of those values possible, exploring the shapes they take when they shed their implicit capitalist and hetero-patriarchal assumptions. This move away from negation towards affirming the possibility of utopian alternatives is vital, because within the emergent neoliberalism of the 1980s the ’79 draft’s political-aesthetic strategy of excess and negation loses much of its subversive charge.

As the discourses of flexible, financial capital infect popular and political culture, they disrupt or even co-opt once-radical challenges to stable identity and futurity. Once the self is refigured as a continuous project of capital development, it easily absorbs appeals to the mutability of the subject. Edelman’s maxim that “queerness can never define an identity, it can only disrupt one,” which sums up much of the confrontational

energy of the '79 draft, is absorbed by neoliberal capital and extruded back in the “disruptive” rhetoric of venture capital and the toxic masculine culture of the emerging tech industries. Similarly, as Shaviro persuasively argues in *No Speed Limit*, rejections of futurity in favor of presentism and jouissance are easily assailable to the speculative logics of financial capital, which evacuate the future in exchange for peak returns in the present. As Robin James notes, in neoliberal culture the most privileged “lead the most intense lives, lives of maximized (individual and social) investment and return” (qtd in Shaviro 32).

Similarly, while challenging the “universalizing coercion” of reproductive futurity remains politically valuable, the 1979 draft’s simple *negation* of the fantasies of Child and Family functions differently amidst the Reagan/Thatcherite assault on social welfare. On one hand, '79 draft’s cheerful disregard of the heteronormative family overlaps in dangerous ways with neoliberalism’s erasure of feminine affective and nurturing labor from the portfolio of *homo economicus*, its normalization of a subject that, as Brown puts it, “disavows all that sustains it and all human arrangements” (*Undoing* 103). To imagine a world in which all human subjects comport themselves as *homo economicus*, one *must* posit a society like the Culture, in which machines take on the responsibility for such feminized labor, without which “the world becomes uninhabitable” (*Undoing* 104). On the other hand, as Brown notes, even as the nurturing subject is disavowed, the twin forces of responsabilization and the dismantling of the welfare state combine to make families—not necessarily defined by heterogenital ties, but as resource-sharing affinity networks—increasingly important sites of support and resistance for those immiserated

by the neoliberal economy (*Undoing* 105-107). Both developments call for a Utopian politics that reimagines the family rather than simply dismissing or negating it.

In the face of the unprecedented neoconservative-neoliberal alliance that powered the Reagan/Thatcher revolution, the 1979 drafts' sacrifice of the mythic Child must also be reevaluated, not just in the Culture's intimate relations, but in its politics of public space and public pleasure. Neoconservatives used their new control over social policy to intensify the policing of social space in the name of the Child. The result was an intensification of the repressive conservative logic in which, as Edelman argues,

The freedoms of adults face constant threat of legal curtailment out of deference to imaginary Children [...] who might witness lewd or inappropriately intimate behavior [...] who might find an enjoyment that would nullify [their] figural value [...] On every side, our enjoyment of liberty is eclipsed by the lengthening shadow of a Child whose freedom to develop undisturbed by encounters, or even the threat of potential encounters, with an "otherness" of which its parents, its church, or the state do not approve, uncompromised by any possible access to what is painted as alien desire, terroristically holds us all in check (*No Future* 19-21).

In the 1979 draft, not only are children conspicuously absent, so is the logic that polices society on their behalf. In it the Culture is a delirious pleasure-dome, a world of orgies and drugs that is aggressively *inappropriate* in all the terms that Edelman describes. But while this strategy pointedly *flaunts* the conservative logic of the vulnerable Child, it doesn't actually challenge it directly by breaking down the binary of pleasure/child. The 1980s revisions work instead towards mapping a social order in which young humans are acclimated to pleasure without shame, *and* adults can embrace their desires without censorship.

This is only one aspect of a larger issue: the 1979 draft's reliance on a political aesthetic of transgression and excess. Gurgeh's conservative *abstinence* is opposed to the performative *transgressive excess* of Culture citizens like Yay who revel in an unlimited, mobile desire to match the Culture's superabundance of erotic possibility. But as Shaviro argues in *No Speed Limit*, the economic logic of neoliberalism in general—as borne out in 1980s popular culture in particular—drains transgression and excess of the subversive charge they held for avant guard and countercultural movements up through the 1970s.

Far from being subversive or oppositional, transgression is the actual motor of capitalist expansion [in neoliberal culture], the way it renews itself in orgies of “creative destruction. [...] In such a climate, nothing is prized more than excess. The further out you go, the more there is to accumulate and capitalize upon [and so] transgression no longer works as a subversive aesthetic strategy. (*No Speed Limit* 32)

Shaviro argues that uncritical and unqualified formulations of a desire that is unquenchable and infinitely malleable—such as Yay enunciates in her disapproval of Shora's monogamy in the '79 draft—are easily subordinated into the “weird metaphysical dualism” at the heart of neoliberal conceptions of the subject.

On the one hand, desire itself is unlimited and intrinsically ungraspable. We cannot ground it, explain it, or circumscribe it in any way. On the other hand, and at the very same time, the particular decisions impelled by this desire are themselves entirely rational and quantifiable. [...] This transformation—from the negativity of unqualifiable desire to the quantitative calculability of “choices” [...] reproduces the way capitalism as a whole both produces abundance, and endlessly transforms it into scarcity. (*No Speed Limit* 54).

In order to escape appropriation by this neoliberal logic of desire, Shaviro argues, political and aesthetic challenges to neoliberal capitalism demand an ethic premised on *cultivation* rather than *consumption*, on practices of pleasure that are deliberate and finite

rather than ravenous and infinitely malleable (*No Speed Limit* 47-56).²¹ In the 1980s revisions to *PoG*, Banks shifts his attention from excess towards the aesthetics of self-cultivation. While the sex and drug remain prominent, a distinctly Wildeian vision of “communism between dinner parties” is brought to the fore, one that is both more sedate and more sociable than the 1979 draft.

5.6 The Failure and Redemption of Power Management in the 1980s drafts

All these changes in the political-aesthetic direction of the narrative are keyed around a single structural shift: locating the “problem” of Gurgeh’s unhappiness within the configuration of his own subjectivity, rather than the configuration of the Culture as a utopian society. This move underlays and unites all the other changes Banks makes to the text, giving the novel, as Caroti notes, the structure of “a *bildungsroman* tracing the growth of a human being from arrested development to full adulthood” (*Culture* 69). As Gurgeh recognizes neoliberal subjectivity not as a kind of advanced vanguard identity, but rather as “arrested development,” the Culture wrests away Capital’s claim to speak for the future.

Where the 1979 version of Gurgeh was marked as conservative and atavistic because of his attachment to the stability of heteronormative monogamy and reproductive futurity, in the 1980s drafts Gurgeh’s social maladjustment is located instead in his

²¹ I think this perspective helps explain Sherryl Vint’s contention that “that there is a deep conservatism about gender in Banks’s work, a preference for ‘natural’ embodiment when it comes to gender and especially reproduction, despite a celebration of augmented bodies in all kinds of other ways—replacing limbs from injury, drug glands, etc.” While I agree with her that Banks’s emphasis on “natural” bodies stems in part from his problematic attachment to the Cartesian roots of his Liberal Humanism (*Bodies that Matter* 81-90), I think that the prevalence of “natural” bodily sensations in the Culture novels can also be read as Banks’s attempt to represent pleasurable consumption within the superabundance of the culture, but distinguish that pleasure transhuman fantasies of prosthetic augmentation and technophilic pleasure that express the “limit-pushing” style of consumption Shaviro links to neoliberal aesthetics.

commitment to the competitive drives of neoliberal capitalism. Gurgeh conducts himself according to the dictates of financial ontology: he is “always and everywhere *homo economicus*,” as Brown would say. This is expressed in the way the systems-conscious, competitive drives implicit in his vocation as a game-player expands to encompass all aspects of his life and personality. Gone, then, are the chastity, passivity, and reclusiveness that characterized Gurgeh in the ’79 draft. Gurgeh becomes socially and sexually aggressive, proud of his own celebrity, and dismissive of others’ emotional needs. Within a culture devoted to cultivating what Terry Eagleton called “the profoundly creative uselessness of communism” (qtd in *No Speed Limit*, 50), Gurgeh cultivates himself as human capital. Rather than shunning social and intimate relationships, he now pursues them as arenas in which to establish competitive dominance. As in the 1979 draft, Gurgeh’s frustration with his life in the Culture stems from his inability to secure the form of masculine identity he desires. This time, though, he fails because “inequality, not equality, is the medium and relation of competing capitals” (Brown 38), and so his failure affirms rather than implicates the Culture’s claim to utopia.

By connecting Gurgeh’s vocation as a game-player to his anxious masculinity, the 1980s drafts are able to interrogate the connections between the neoliberal injunctions towards competitive domination, the masculine injunction to intimate domination, and the strategic portfolio of power management. But although Gurgeh ultimately abandons finance ontology’s injunction that all aspects of *human* social reality must be governed as capital projects, the conclusion implies that the Minds, whose experience of power lacks either embodied or historical imbrication with gendered sexual domination, might be able

to productively mobilize the portfolio of power management in ways that human subjects cannot. The Minds' structures of desire (such as we see them) simply do not lead them into the same cognitive and affective pathologies from which Gurgeh spends the narrative extricating himself.²²

Making Gurgeh into a character obsessed with competition, then, solves both the narrative and political issues of the 1979 draft. Gurgeh's atavistic masculine subjectivity becomes a narrative vehicle through which the Culture's utopian queer self-cultivation is productively opposed to the neoliberal project of self as capital development, a structuring opposition that carries through the whole arc of the narrative. Gurgeh's unhappiness in the first act arises from his participation in the fantasy of power management—from stubborn insistence on attempting to apply the best practices of neoliberal competition to “win” every social interaction. Not only does power management fail to win him positions of comparative advantage for Gurgeh, but this approach alienates him from the profoundly anti-competitive dynamics of sharing and play that structure the Culture's affective and erotic relations. Both Gurgeh's personal unhappiness, *and* the impression of “failures” in the Culture that are reported from within his point of view, are actually consequences of his decision to perceive the world through finance ontology, as an “unbounded field of competition.” In his atavistic attachment to competitive masculinity, Gurgeh voluntarily adopts the blinkered perspective of capitalist

²² The Minds lack of genital biology means that the minds have no experience—however vestigial—of the drives and pleasures of sex, and no personal or cultural history of unequal sex relations, so there is much less incentive for them to use sexual relations as a cognitive metaphor for power relations. To the extent that we do see them do so in other culture novels, it is almost always as a derogatory term—“meatfucker”—denoting profoundly degraded and *unequal* relations with humans. The term shames the perpetrating Mind, not the human victim.

realism, and so the affective abundance of the Culture disappears over a utopian horizon *even as he lives amidst it*. Only by renouncing power management as a fantastic *ideal* for competitive masculine subjectivity can he pierce this artificial horizon and re-connect with the Culture's networks of affective plenty.

5.6.1 Communism between Dinner Parties: Expanding Gurgeh's Social Networks

In his recent overview of Banks's Culture series, Paul Kincaid is casually dismissive of the portrait of Culture society provided by the *Play of Games*, summing it up in a single throwaway sentence: "reflecting Gurgeh's own boredom with his life, what we see consists of tedious parties and uninspiring games" (*Banks* 50). Yet examination of the revision process shows how much attention Banks paid to crafting those "tedious parties," and how much their inclusion changes our understanding of both Gurgeh and the Culture at large. These revisions show that in the published text, readers' own impatience with these "tedious parties"—their desire for the *real business* of heroism (violence and domination) to begin—is as much an object of critique and deconstruction as Gurgeh's own atavistic masculinity.

These "tedious parties" are totally absent from the 1979 draft, in which Gurgeh is a recluse whose only interactions are private ones: Chamlis and Yay visit him at his home, he has several awkward dinners with his ex-wife Cho, and he returns to his ancestral family compound for the funeral of a male relative. Even in his vocation as a celebrity game-player, he avoids publicity and tends to duck his fans when he encounters them. He refuses offers to teach at the local university and publishes his scholarly work

anonymously. He avoids parties, not only because he hates interacting with strangers, but to escape the orgies they tend to lead into (1979 Ms. pg 24).

In contrast, the 1980s texts are full of social activity. Gurgeh is affiliated with the local university community, serving as a guest lecturer. He competes and publishes in his own name, and enjoys what recognition his success brings. Despite being a bit of a misanthrope, Gurgeh attends a variety of festivals and parties, and he is also shown hosting gatherings of his own. These outings frequently end in sexual encounters for Gurgeh. It is true that he finds *some* of these social functions tedious, but this is not always the case. There are several instances where he is deeply moved by the affection and community he experiences at these events.

I want to emphasize three aspects of the vibrant social world we are shown during the first section of the 1980s drafts. First, a significant part of Gurgeh's social circle is made up of faculty and students from the local university. Gurgeh is good friends (and occasional sexual partner to) to a Professor of Game Studies named Boruelal, who is described as a woman almost twice his age, and from their dialogue it is clear that, not only has he taught classes in her department, but playing against him is an important informal part of many students' education in gaming (published text 10-11). Despite his resistance to formally joining the faculty, Gurgeh is clearly immersed in the educational milieu.

While some might be tempted to read the comparison between campus and Culture as satirical, evidence of the decadence and empty frivolity of both, in doing so one capitulates to the neoliberal travesty of education, in which "knowledge is [no

longer] sought for purposes apart from capital enhancement” (Brown 177). As Brown forcefully argues in *Undoing the Demos*, the expansion of public education was one of the most radical achievements of post-WWII social democracy, an endeavor which represented some of the most utopian aspirations of liberal humanism—precisely the values central to Banks’s vision of the Culture.

Extending liberal arts education from the elite to the many was nothing short of a radical democratic event, one in which all became potentially eligible for the life of freedom long reserved for the few. [...] Regardless of the quantitative and qualitative limits on its realization, the radicalism of this event cannot be overstated: for the first time in human history, higher educational policy and practice were oriented toward the many, tacitly destining them for intelligent engagement with the world, rather than economic servitude or mere survival. (*Undoing* 185).

From their classical roots to the much denigrated English and Art majors of today, the liberal arts are at base projects of self-cultivation. By making college life such a prominent part of *The Player of Games*’s exploration of “regular” life in the Culture, Banks shows us that what are, in our world, the *exceptional* liberal values of “developing the capacities of citizens, sustaining culture, knowing the world, [and] envisioning and crafting different ways of life in common” (*Undoing* 179) have become the *normative* values of the Culture. Though *Gurgeh* may sometimes be dismissive of this environment, *we* should not. It is precisely in its normative commitment to self-cultivation as a *public good* that the Culture approaches Johnston’s utopian vision of queer creative utopia, of “hordes of artists (all the people) making sand castles and other inanities inside and outside of their heads, or doing nothing at all” (qtd in Muñoz, 125-6). The reclusive *Gurgeh* of the 1979 draft encountered *none* of this dynamic emancipatory energy. Banks added it all to the narrative in the course of the 1980s revisions.

Most of the party scenes in *PoG* are hosted by Gurgeh's friend Hafflis. Banks makes sure to note the diversity of the revelers. While Boruelal and the university contingent are well represented at these events, they mingle with habitat engineers (Yay's occupation), construction workers ("a Manufactory drone from under the massif"), travelers passing through, and—importantly—Hafflis's many offspring. While these children are only mentioned a few times (on pages 53, 114-115, and 117 of the published text), their presence is vital to repudiating the 1979 draft's crisis of reproductive futurity. First, the parties that Gurgeh attends at Hafflis's in the 1980s drafts effectively replace the sections of the 1979 draft where Gurgeh interacts with Cho—who has been written out of the novel almost entirely now that Gurgeh is no longer a chaste, reclusive divorcee.²³ Gurgeh and Cho's *failure* to reproduce is replaced with Hafflis's exuberant *over-production* of offspring.

Hafflis was unusual in having had seven children; normally people bore one and fathered one. The Culture frowned on such profligacy, but Hafflis just liked being pregnant. He was in a male stage at the moment, however, having changed a few years earlier (published text 53).

Procreation is thus a normative value, but not in any recognizably heteronormative way—most culture citizens experience both fatherhood *and* motherhood in the course of their long lives, almost certainly with different partners. Further, while Edelman argues that when reproductive futurity is dominant, sexual pleasure is infected with and subordinated to procreation, in Gurgeh's description of Hafflis we see the opposite. "Hafflis just liked being pregnant"—procreation is subsumed to and driven by

²³ "Cho" is gone as a named character, though at one point, Gurgeh notes that there are ten of his former lovers in attendance at a party, and singles out a woman named "Vossle Chu" as one of them. Rather than being the singular but barren love of his life, in the published text she is notable for being an amateur metallurgist who gifted him with a cannon she had forged—a gift of creative progeny (115).

pleasure. While such excessive procreation is “frowned on” *in general*, no one seems to impose any censorship on Hafflis or his children *in particular*. Though a minor character, then, the inclusion of Hafflis’s “profligacy” effectively dispels the atmosphere of sterility that characterized the 1979 draft, and instead established procreation as a yet another site of variety and pleasure in the Culture.

The fact that Gurgeh finds encountering these children at parties full of drink, drugs, and debauchery totally unremarkable also serves to show how the 1980s revisions disrupt the “terroristic” policing function of the mythical Child identified by Edelman, without banishing children altogether. Hafflis’s children not only “witness lewd or inappropriately intimate behavior” in *PoG*, they are often shown rescuing adults from the consequences of such behavior. At the culmination of Gurgeh’s going-away party in the published text, for instance, a drunken Gurgeh “was dumped naked into the lake, but hauled out sputtering by Hafflis’s children” (117).

In the 1979 draft, there was no such going away party. Departing for Azad, Gurgeh “felt cheated; he was going on a great journey, something that might change his life, and the people he knew best either weren’t there or were being selfishly moody and quiet” (1979 Ms. pg 67). This reversal encapsulates the larger shift in the 1980s revisions: from a selfish Culture that doesn’t “show up” when its citizens try to make meaning in their lives, to Gurgeh as the selfish subject, so moodily obsessed with domination he cuts him off from the vibrant community that, nevertheless, strives to embrace him.

5.6.2 Revising Yay and Chamlis: Clarifying the Stakes of Gurgeh's Competitiveness

Nowhere is this new dynamic clearer than in Banks's changes to Gurgeh's relationships to his closest companions, Chamlis and Yay. In the 1979 draft, a posterity-obsessed Gurgeh looked to the older drone and the younger woman for the kind of quasi-familial generational structure the Childless Culture could not provide for him. In the 1980s revisions, this family dynamic survives, but because Gurgeh is now obsessed with competition, their little family is riven with oedipal tensions. As his apprentice in gaming, Yay becomes both a potential future rival in his vocation *and* an object of sexual desire—and thus doubly a target for sexualized conquest. Gurgeh's egotistic anxieties do not replace, but rather exist in tension with their bonds of affection. It is Gurgeh who is unable to accept that Yay could be student, rival, friend, and lover all at the same time. His need to force her exclusively into one role or another in their interactions is the source of most of the emotional drama of the first act.

The self-imposed nature of his dissatisfaction is conveyed through scenes with Yay. She is open to incorporating a sexual element into their relationship, as friendship, as fun, as the any of the other modes of sexuality the culture recognizes. But Gurgeh is unwilling or unable to take her lead. Despite their obvious emotional connection, he demands that his relationship with Yay be legible in terms of "moves and responses," as a narrative of his *conquest of her*. There is often a noticeable shift in language and action when Gurgeh switches over into "game mode": Gurgeh begins to speak not to communicate, but rather to steer and maneuver others, much like Dexter Morgan did in the last chapter. While we see these instrumentalized performances several times

throughout the narratives, they are particularly marked in his interaction with Yay. In the following short scene from page 27 of the published text, I mark the elements that show how Gurgeh begins to use game-like “moves” in an attempt to maneuver and manipulate Yay, which serve to drive her away rather than draw her in.

“Are you leaving with this lot, Yay?” **Gurgeh [dropped] his voice a little so that Yay had to turn away from the discussion to face him.**

“You’re going to ask me to stay again, aren’t you?”

“I doubt it. I get bored going **through the same old moves and responses.**”

Yay smiled. “You never know,” she said. “One day I might change my mind.”

Gurgeh cannot grasp that the “one day” Yay hints at would be the day he stops trying to *capture* her affections, and simply *accepts* them instead. When she rebuffs him, he seeks out another target, a young woman named Ren, who is either more susceptible to his “seduction game” or simply willing to play along with it. Again, I’ve marked the parts that emphasize his game-like approach of “moves and responses”

Gurgeh left Yay [...] and went to talk to Ren Myglan, a young woman he’d been hoping would call that evening [...] After a few minutes, **standing near her, talking, occasionally moving a little closer, he was whispering into her ear, and once or twice he reached round behind her, to run his fingers down her spine through the silky dress she wore.**

“I said I’d go on with the others,” she told him quietly, looking down, biting her lip, and putting her hand behind her, holding his where it rubbed at the small of her back.

“Some boring band, some singer, performing for everybody?” **he chided gently, taking his hand away, smiling.** “You deserve more individual attention, Ren.”

She laughed quietly, nudging him.

(Published text, 29).

Once he has captured Ren’s attention, “winning” validation for his seductive technique through his sexual conquest of her, Gurgeh immediately loses interest. Ren “left during breakfast the next morning, after an argument; he liked to work during breakfast, she’d wanted to talk” (32-33). Gurgeh is baffled by her anger, because he is mostly blind to the

way his competitive compulsion drives his actions, and to the consequences his misbehavior creates for those around him.

This sense of Gurgeh's bad behavior as a form of blindness or disability is a vital difference between the 1985 draft and the final published text. Making competition and lust for hierarchical dominance central to Gurgeh's character is key to redeeming the Culture as a Utopia in these drafts, but in the 1985 draft Banks over corrects, taking character makeover too far. Here Gurgeh is a raging, boorish bastard, who gleefully ruins Hafflis's parties and leaves several of his sexual partners in tears. Gurgeh doesn't just have a problem; he *is a problem* for everyone around him.²⁴

This effectively destroys the Culture's claim to be a utopian space of radically transformed social relations in the 1985 manuscript. While possessive hetero-masculinity may no longer be normalized in this version of the Culture, it still occupies a privileged place because performing it still allows Gurgeh to coerce his way into positions of social dominance. In the '85 draft, Gurgeh bludgeons his way around Culture society by being too "tough" for the "soft" subjects around him to resist—in effect restaging the plays out the masculine crisis narrative familiar from '79 manuscript.

Thus, even if the 1985 draft made a step forward in figuring Gurgeh's masculinity as the problem, it takes two steps back in presenting a Culture still beholden to that problematic masculinity. Consider the following conversation from the 1985 draft, in

²⁴ I suspect that some of this machismo is spillover from Banks's *The Wasp Factory*, which was published in 1984. The antihero of that novel, Frank, exemplifies the cruelty and violence of toxic masculinity, and some of that cruel zeal bleeds into Gurgeh in the '85 draft. On connections between *The Wasp Factory* and the Culture novels, see Caroti 30-41, 63-66, and Kincaid 32-39.

which Yay and Chamlis talk about the way Gurgeh's behavior alienates her, causing her to reject him as a sexual partner:

"Ah," the machine said. "Have you and Gurgeh - "

"No," Yay said.

"I see," Chamlis said, after a slight pause. "I rather assumed you had."

"Nope. Not likely to, either."

"Hmm. I thought you were fairly free in your favors." Chamlis sounded amused.

"I am, usually." Yay said archly, [...] an expression of annoyance and frustration on her face [...] "But Gurgeh's different."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "He seems to take it all too seriously. It's not fun, it's not friendship, it's not in-love love... it's something else again; like it was a game he wants to win... trouble is, the way he plays it, if he wins, you lose." She looked to one side, picked a sunbread up, and bit into it. "Not sure I like that," she said while she munched.

"Maybe he's just old-fashioned," Chamlis suggested, floating through the air to the couch the young woman lay on, one leg crossed over the other at the knee, moving up and down.

"Maybe he is," Yay agreed. She took another mouthful of sunbread, turned the half-eaten fruit over in her hand. "Maybe he just had a funny childhood. I don't know."

(1985 Ms. pg 3/1)

First, in the 1985 draft Gurgeh goes well beyond "old fashioned"—he is by turns manipulative, creepy, and cruel. More importantly, though, that fact that both so easily diagnose his anti-social actions as manifestations of an "old-fashioned" competitive masculinity shows that such toxic gender ideology is still circulating and readily available Culture society. Further, this conversation borders on slut-shaming—even as Chamlis appears to share Yay's frustration with Gurgeh's behavior, he still highlights Yay's own sexual behavior as worthy of note, putting the onus on her to justify her sexual history. Despite the apparent goal of the conversation—critiquing Gurgeh's inappropriate sexual behavior—it is Yay who ends up on the defensive.

The published draft addresses these problems by scaling back Gurgeh's bad behavior, shifting him from cruel to clueless. While that helps absolve *Gurgeh*, what rescues the *Culture's* claim to sexual enlightenment is the way Banks makes Gurgeh's behavior as illegible to others as they are to Gurgeh himself.

This change in the published text is well illustrated in the revisions to a key conversation between Yay and Gurgeh, in which they both struggle to articulate his divergence from the Culture's norms of intimacy. The published version gives Yay more agency and normalizes her behavior as culture-standard. It is clear that her behavior is transparent and obvious to her—as Althusser would note, such obviousness is the mark of ideology. Her perspective only seems strange to Gurgeh *because he is strange*—a strangeness that neither he nor Yay can identify and name. Banks emphasizes this shift in legibility by excising key lines. The bolded sections indicate elements that were present in the 85 draft but are missing from the final text:

"So; why not [sleep with me]?" There. He'd finally said it. Yay pursed her lips. "Because," she said, looking up at him, "it matters so much to you."
"Ah," he nodded, looking down, rubbing his beard, "I should have feigned indifference." He looked straight at her. **"I didn't think you were so insecure." "I'm not. It's the way it matters.** I feel you want to ... take me, like a piece, like an idea. To be had; to be... possessed." Suddenly she looked very puzzled. "there's something very... I don't know; primitive, perhaps, about you Gurgeh. **Not just the way you play games; most people see that ferocity, but there's something else; an attitude I don't think you see much these days.**" she shrugged, **drank, smacked her lips. "You take being male, being masculine very seriously. Has anybody ever said that to you before?"**
"Only in circumstances when I thought it must be a compliment." Gurgeh said.
"And you've never change sex, have you?" He shook his head. "Or slept with a man?" Another shake. "I thought so," Yay said. "You're strange, Gurgeh."
(1985 Ms. pg 3/16)

In the final version, Gurgeh's strangeness is tied *somehow* to his attachment to maleness, but neither is able to articulate how or why, beyond the vague intuition that he has tapped into something "primitive." This lack of easy definition viscerally demonstrates both how exceptional Gurgeh's atavistic masculinity is within the Culture, *and* how little threat his perverse subjectivity poses to the post-patriarchal, post-capitalist social structure he lives within. In the published text, neither he nor his friends can put their finger on what makes him different... and crucially, it isn't really pressing that they do, because Gurgeh no longer poses a threat to anything but his own happiness. The fact that he is, as Caroti notes, "perfectly free to feel that way and safe in expressing these feelings" demonstrates how impervious the Culture's utopian sexual culture is to the atavistic masculine forces Gurgeh represents. Gurgeh is simply an undiagnosed anomaly, mysterious but harmless, socially disabled rather than socially dangerous.

5.6.3 The Mawhrin-Skel Gambit (It's not a Liar, it's a Lie)

And so Gurgeh would have remained, had the Minds of Special Circumstances not intervened in his life. In the 1979 draft, Gurgeh reaches out to Contact, asking them to find something that might assuage his feelings of restlessness and lack of meaning. When they respond, proposing the trip to Azad, he promptly agrees to the mission. In the published text, Gurgeh's recruitment to the Azad mission takes a much more circuitous path: despite his frustration with Culture life, he must be carefully maneuvered and manipulated into leaving. The primary agent of this manipulation is a drone named Mawhrin-Skel.

The broad outline of Gurgeh's recruitment in the published text looks like this: Gurgeh growing increasingly unhappy. Not only is his compulsive competitiveness spilling out of his gaming to poison the rest of his life, but he is can no longer find much thrill in the games themselves. Chamlis sends a message to Contact on Gurgeh's behalf, but when they come calling Gurgeh insists he isn't interested. However, the disgraced ex-Contact drone learns of the meeting. Soon afterwards, Mawhrin-Skel tempts Gurgeh into cheating during a public match, and uses evidence of that transgression to blackmail Gurgeh into accepting Contact's mission. When it is revealed to the reader later in the novel that Skel was itself a Contact agent all along, it seems that Gurgeh never really had a choice. Going to Azad was a mission he wasn't allowed to refuse.

Despite acknowledging him as a liar, most critical readings of the novel take Skel and his part in Gurgeh's recruitment at face value. I argue that close attention to Banks's pattern of revision impels us to be much more skeptical of Skel's claims, and this leads to a very different impression, both of Gurgeh's recruitment, and of the character of the Contact personnel more generally. Mawhrin-Skel's backstory—and the specific language he uses to convey it to Gurgeh—serves to give shape and focus to Gurgeh's own inchoate competitive drives. Gurgeh is fascinated by the drone because he sees in its exaggerated performance of emasculation a model for articulating how own strangeness for the first time.

The reader is first given Mawhrin-Skel's backstory through Gurgeh's perspective. Despite hearing it in the narrator's "voice," the exposition is reporting Gurgeh's understanding of the situation. I will quote the section in full, setting off in bold the

elements of the drone's story tuned to resonate with Gurgeh's own atavistic masculine subjectivity.

Mawhrin-Skel was a more recent acquaintance. The **irascible, ill-mannered** little drone had arrived on Chiark Orbital a couple of hundred days earlier [...] Mawhrin-Skel had been designed as a Special Circumstances drone for the Culture's Contact section; effectively a military machine with a variety of sophisticated, hardened sensory and weapons systems **which would have been quite unnecessary and useless on the majority of drones.** As with all Sentient culture constructs, its precise character had not been fully mapped out before its construction, but allowed to develop as the drone's mind was put together. The Culture regarded this unpredictable factor in its production of conscious machines as the price to be paid for individuality, but the result was that not every drone so brought into being was entirely suitable for the tasks it had initially been designed for.

Mawhrin-Skel was one such **rogue drone.** Its personality—it had been decided—wasn't right for Contact, not even for special Circumstances. It was unstable, **belligerent and insensitive** [...] it had been given the choice of radical personality alteration, in which it would have little or no say about its eventual character, or a life outside Contact, with its **personality intact but its weapons removed to bring it down to something nearer the level of a standard drone.** It had, **bitterly,** chosen the latter.

(Published text 15)

Skel's backstory just happens to give the drone the same motivations Gurgeh is struggling to understand in himself: the feeling that the purpose to which he is best suited (competition, domination) is denied to him; that in order to fit in and appreciate a lifestyle enjoyed by "the majority" of "average" subjects, he has to give up precisely the elements of himself that elevate him above the crowd. The drone's story puts shape to the arrogant egotism at the heart of Gurgeh's discontent.

Skel makes the connections between its propensity towards domination and specifically masculine subjectivity absolutely clear in a later rant to Gurgeh. "Don't you understand what they've done to me, *man*? I've been castrated, spayed, paralyzed!"

(published text pg 70, orig emphasis.). The italicized man highlights how directly Skel

hails Gurgeh as a masculine subject here. The Drone's use of the language of castration is fascinating here. In a world of medical miracles, where genofixed bodies heal themselves of almost any harm, and in which one can change one's genital sex on a whim, the primeval association of castration with a loss of power and potency has lost all sense. It is exactly the kind of sexist heteromascuine thinking whose Cultural extinction is demonstrated in the carefully revised conversations between Yay, Chamlis, and Gurgeh discussed above. We must read what the drone is doing here as an attempt, not to *communicate* its condition to Gurgeh, but rather to *infect him* with the language of toxic masculinity, to seed Gurgeh with words and images that will bring his latent masculine pathologies to consciousness. Everything Skel reveals about itself, in other words, is part of a larger plot to intervene in Gurgeh's consciousness by *accelerating* his masculine desires.

From this perspective, Skel's backstory is a precisely tuned tool for affectively manipulating Gurgeh—what Jessica in *Dune* called an attack via the “basic arrangements of our lives,” targeting Gurgeh's sense of “place” within the Culture's social network “to disturb, disrupt, and confuse” him, unbalancing him and preparing him for more subtle forms of control (*Dune* 153-5). Such manipulative technique clearly situates the Contacts Minds within the tradition of affective power management running back to *Dune*. Further, Gurgeh isn't the only one targeted for manipulation by Skel's carefully crafted backstory. More subtly, its masculinist language also influences the readers' assumptions about Contact/Special Circumstances relation to and influence on the rest of Culture society. If we take seriously Skel's statement that he was *intended* to be “a good soldier

fighting for all that we hold dear,” *designed* to “seek out and smite the barbarians” (71), then Contact and SC are necessarily full of masculinized characters like him—aggressive, if less impulsively so.²⁵ Further, and more importantly, to the extent that readers are hailed by the hierarchy implicit in Skel’s narrative—in which proximity to violence is “up” and being disarmed “castrated” him and pushed him “down to something nearer the level of a standard drone”—then they also accept the implication those values define the “top” levels of agency and power in Banks’s universe: the Minds’ administration of the Culture and its relations with other societies. Skel’s story affirms Gurgeh’s suspicion that his competitive instincts and his drive for domination place him “above” other Culture citizens, closer to the “higher” level of both sentience and power that is the Culture Minds. For the reader, it seems to authorize one of the pernicious ideologies latent in space opera sf: the transhumanist drive to dominance and self-expansion that is also at the heart of the finance ontology of neoliberalism.²⁶

²⁵ Readers who come to *PoG* after reading *Use of Weapons* are especially likely to bite on Skel’s lure here, as *UoW* does feature an SC drone with an unwholesome zeal for violence. I would simply remind such readers of the narrative function of Skaffen-Amtiskaw’s bloodlust, which worked to clarify Sma and Zakalwe’s respective relations to violence, and to each other; and suggest that reading the drone’s derangement in that context might be more useful than viewing it as an index for the ethical perspective of all SC drones, or all SC in general. The SC drones in *Inversions*, *Excision*, and *Matter* all show considerably more empathy and restraint. Of course, another interpretative wrinkle here is the fact that, according to Skel, it was rejected because it was *too* excited to employ its violent capacities. “I want to fight, Gurgeh [...] to use skill and cunning and *force* to win battles for our dear beloved Culture. I’m not interested in controlling others, or in making the strategic decisions that sort of power doesn’t interest me” (107). If there is anything we learn about SC in the other Culture novels, it is that most agents are united in their obsession with questioning the “strategic decisions” that guide their actions. Perhaps it was this *lack* of doubt in the “dear beloved Culture” that was disqualifying. Indeed, as sentient weapons with the capacity to question both the strategic *and* the ethical legitimacy of their deployment, Banks’s SC drones offer a wry commentary on the rhetoric of “smart bombs” in RMA discourse, that would sanitize the wanton destruction of US military action from the 1991 Gulf war onwards.

²⁶ See Shaviro’s discussion of the confluence of transhumanist and neoliberal ideology in “The Singularity is Here.” Many of the “post-singularity sf” texts and authors he focuses on, such as Charles Stross’s *Accelerando* and the work of Vernor Vinge, lie well within the generic horizon of space opera.

If, instead, we view everything about Skel's performance with suspicion, we need cede none of that ideological ground to capital. Skel's narrative hail's Gurgeh's pernicious masculinity, not to validate it, but so that it may be manifested and exorcised through the action of the narrative, just as its hailing of readers through the militarist and colonial assumptions of space opera set up the deconstruction of that ideology in the narrative. This pattern of hailing, recognition, and deconstruction structure Gurgeh's experience throughout the novel: the Minds engineer situations in which he able to viscerally experience the pathological, antisocial pleasures he abstractly desires, but such direct experience also lances their aura of nostalgia, draining them of mystery and romantic heroism.

Gurgeh's entrapment and blackmail by Skel in the first section of the narrative is the first iteration of this pattern. Not only does its fictional biography allow Gurgeh to consciously recognize the autobiography he has been telling himself unconsciously, but the terrible positions the drone puts Gurgeh into—cornered, blackmailed, physically threatened, faced with the loss of everything he holds dear, forced to improvise frantically to regain it—provide *exactly* the experiences that Gurgeh most deeply desires. We can see the structure of this desire in Chamlis's probing diagnosis of Gurgeh as a gambler rather than a game-player. "You want something you can't have, Gurgeh. You enjoy your life in the Culture, but it can't provide you with sufficient threats; the true gambler needs the excitement of potential loss, even ruin, to feel wholly alive" (23). This diagnosis is confirmed in the almost sexual rush Gurgeh experiences when contrived circumstances make it *appear* he might have cheated in a game (46). Gurgeh is initially

intoxicated by the risk to his only real possessions—safety, reputation, identity—but this flush of pleasure rapidly fades into shame and dread as he is forced to confront the violently oppressive social relations that afford his realization of that pleasure (80-2). From this perspective, Gurgeh’s whole mission to the Empire of Azad—including his cultivation, entrapment, and blackmail by Skel—must be read not only in terms of Gurgeh’s labor on behalf of Contact, but also as an elaborate program of psychodramatic therapy devised for Gurgeh’s own benefit, in which the Culture Minds invest the Culture’s superlative surplus of cognitive, material, and affective resources to perform therapeutic labor on behalf of a distressed citizen. Although Gurgeh is used by the Minds, then, played as piece in their larger game, because that usage both conformed to the contours of his desires, *and* ultimately served a genuine therapeutic purpose, it is hard to say that he was *exploited*. Gurgeh was a collaborator rather than simply a tool for the Minds, *both* means and end in their game of governance-as-cultivation. Rather than *playing with Gurgeh*, they *played together with* him to access and repair a damaged part of himself—just as, ultimately, the Minds *played with* rather than *against* the Empire.

We will consider whether the Minds’ can be said to have “exploited” Gurgeh further when we consider the close of the novel below. Here, it is sufficient to note that, whether one takes Skel’s cover story at face value or not, the *effect* of the drone’s actions is to clarify and amplify Gurgeh’s atavistic masculinity, and to focus both his *and* *readers’* attention on the way that such competitive drives demand *ends* in order to signify. As Caroti notes, Gurgeh is, at a fundamental level, “a player who won’t find pleasure in playing unless the outcome of the game carries consequences beyond the

game's immediate context" (*Culture* 68). Despite being defined as a game player, Gurgeh cannot recognize the aesthetics of cultivation inherent in the emergent experience of play as end in itself.

This question of the *ends* to play is the central problem that separates Gurgeh from the Utopian lifeworld of the Culture. Freed from want, toil, and fear, every form of activity becomes a form of play, a game played not for extrinsic stakes, but rather for the joy of creating something new and unique in the process. Just as each member of the Culture is freed to cultivate themselves as aesthetic projects, all *social and communal* projects in the Culture, from erotic encounters between individuals to the design of orbital habitats, are projects of cultivation, whose beautiful development is an end unto itself. He is unable to participate in these relationships, in which affection, fulfillment, and meaning arrive as gifts, unforced emergent properties of the game unfolding in that moment. Gurgeh is unable to "relax, with an assurance of being supported by [the] continuing social abundance" of the Culture's playful mutual cultivation. Instead, like capitalism itself, Gurgeh "*has* to transform plenitude into scarcity, because it cannot endure its own abundance [...] once scarcity has been overcome, there is nothing left to drive competition" (Shaviro 46).

The ability reconnect with play, to move past the focus on zero-sum domination and "relax" into the mutual cultivation of unfolding possibility, is the "lesson" that Gurgeh must win in the published text's the second act, the change in his character that will resolve all the tensions of the first. Structurally linked in the narrative through Skel's backstory, Gurgeh's transformation metaphorically extends to our understanding of the

Minds, disentangling competitive dominance from their speculative governance as well. Gurgeh's serious work of play during his mission to the Empire will ultimately prove that the Culture's ethos of playful cultivation doesn't shut off where "serious" political struggle begins, the assumption (of Gurgeh and possibly the reader) that Mawhrin-Skel's story seems to confirm. In his interactions and his time in the Azad arena, Gurgeh will discover that aesthetic cultivation and affective abundance are the grounds from which effective *and* ethical action can spring.

5.6.5 Into the Azad II: Accelerating Gurgeh, Deconstructing Heterocapitalist Desire

Above, I argued that in the 1979 draft the specific details of Gurgeh's adventures in the Azad are unimportant, because they don't impact either his character or the readers' understanding of the Culture. What matters is the overall impression they make. Gurgeh is disgusted by the Azadians and the sadistic forms of desire that structure their society. Yet his attitude of repulsion and refusal is not really different than his reaction to the excessive, hedonistic Culture. The '79 draft stages a comparison between two accelerated trajectories—welfare liberalism and nascent neoliberal capitalism. After sharing Gurgeh's alienated, exhausting experience of both, the reader is left to judge between them. Even assuming the worst about the Culture, as the '79 draft does, it comes out ahead, the least worst of all possible worlds.

In contrast, in the published text of the novel each of Gurgeh's experiences in the Empire takes on real narrative significance, because this version of Gurgeh starts out so deeply implicated in the horrors of Azadian culture. The features of capitalism and patriarchal domination Banks accelerates in the Azad are precisely the objects of Gurgeh's nostalgic

longing. Like the blackmail scenario that brought him into the mission, each experience in the Empire provides Gurgeh with visceral experiences of risk and domination that he abstractly desired. Bringing those desires to consciousness, confronting their concrete instantiation in Azadian society, Gurgeh is able to recognize and reject his nostalgic investments in competition and heteromascularity—just as readers are prompted to recognize and reconsider the pleasures they look for in space operatic narrative, and their own assumptions about the relationship between utopia, desire, and agency. This iterative, deconstructive process plays out largely through Gurgeh’s discovery of the way “desire,” “ends,” and “interests” structured within the accelerated neoliberal logic of Azadian society. Safely ensconced within the utopian relations of Culture society, Gurgeh waxes nostalgic about competitive hierarchies of domination, but he quails before the concrete reality of oppression and inequality that afford such relations in the Empire. In this confrontation between abstract nostalgia and visceral reality, Banks highlights key shifts in the concepts of “interest” and “desire” that not only distinguish neoliberalism from previous modes of capitalism, but create a distinctive neoliberal aesthetics (or antiaesthetics). Immersed in the Azad, Gurgeh accelerates through his own attachment to this neoliberal aesthetic, ultimately arriving at the Culture’s queer aesthetics of cultivation as both effective and affective alternative.

5.6.5.1 Means, Ends, and Neoliberal Desire in the Empire of Azad

Culture society lacks the experience of neoliberalism’s responsabilizing pressure on the desiring subject, its deformation of aesthetics, and so, lacks language to describe either. Within the Culture, then, Gurgeh necessarily serves as his own exemplar for

neoliberal desire. Haunted by his nostalgia for masculine hierarchy and capitalist accumulation, Gurgeh wants his pleasures to signify *beyond* his finite enjoyment of them. His experience of desire is *more* restless and *less* finite than anyone else he knows, far outside the Culture norm which “gladly accepts qualified and temporary satisfactions, rather than wallowing in perpetually unfulfilled and unquenched desire” (Shaviro 52). The perverse exultation he finds in the momentary dominance of victory in gaming comes closest to assuaging this yearning, and Gurgeh clings to the “rank” he “accumulates” in his chosen vocation. Gurgeh uses games to generate scarcity and thus distinction amid the Culture’s abundance, expressing his atavistic preoccupation with what John Maynard Keynes called “relative” desire, which finds satisfaction only in what “lifts us above, makes us feel superior to, our fellows” (qtd in Shaviro 53). He is less interested in the aesthetic unfolding of experience within the game, than with how the result will impact his implicitly masculine “brand” as a winner, which seems to grant him “something nobody can copy, nobody else can have; I’m one of the best” (*PoG* 23). Gurgeh seeks social and carnal “conquest” to recreate this “elevated” sense of masculine individualism in all parts of his life.

Attention and respect are among the few finite resources that remain in the Culture, and so in his minor celebrity Gurgeh experiences a faint echo of neoliberalism’s responsabilizing injunction to brand oneself as worthy of continuing investment. Yet this pale echo isn’t enough, because his efforts to accumulate attention, despite its scarcity, don’t translate into dominance or distinction. While *winning* is everything to Gurgeh, *gaming* is just one form of play at which to excel in amidst the Culture’s indiscriminate

cultivation of eccentric genius, what Terry Eagleton called “the profoundly creative uselessness of communism” (qtd in Shaviro 50).

In his compulsive gamification of all aspects of his life, Gurgeh is not only chasing the will-o’-wisp of heteromasculine dominance but trying to prove—to himself as much as anyone else—that his obsession with gaming separates him from the rest of the Culture citizen-artists “making sandcastles and other inanities” (Johnston, qtd in Muñoz 126). Gurgeh believes strategic competition expresses secret truths and affords its devotees privileged insight—essentially, neoliberalism’s case for competition as the ultimate base of ontology. It was the seeming confirmation of this ontological suspicion—that, in its heart of hearts, Contact, market reason secretly ruled the Culture—that Mawhrin-Skel hailed Gurgeh (and the implied reader), prying him out of himself and into the Empire.

Yet once he arrives in Azad, where these values are culturally dominant, Gurgeh finds that his desires are comparatively muted. He queasily rebuffs the advances of sex workers, paparazzi, and aristocrats alike. He refrains from these intimate “games” mostly because of his growing awareness of the precarity that threatens those who “lose” in the Empire. Within the Culture, one may win and lose celebrity, but access to the material and social common—what Shaviro called one’s “assurance of being supported”—remains inviolable. But in a neoliberal culture such as Azad, where “there is no society, only men and women,”

Disintegrating the social into entrepreneurial and self-investing bits removes umbrellas of protection provided by belonging [...] A subject construed and constructed as human capital both for itself and for a firm or state is at constant

risk of failure, redundancy, and abandonment through no doing of its own, no matter how savvy and responsible it is. (Brown 37).

In the Empire, to make a “wager of the body” means to literally stake one’s own mutilation on the outcome of an Azad match (98, 249-52, 269-71). Yet in its vicious inequality, the majority of Azadians find all of life to be such a wager. They are forced, daily, to confront exactly the sense of “potential loss, even ruin” that Gurgeh romanticized at the opening of the novel. But while Gurgeh nostalgically desired to put *himself* at risk (*PoG* 22-5, 46, 80-2), he never seriously considered how such risk would also extend to the other players, let alone the implications of a whole society defined by such precarity. In other words, Gurgeh seeks to impose competitive relations so that he can “lift” himself up, but he is uninterested in (and often ignorant of) the way that such elevation is also created by pushing others down through domination and degradation.

The aesthetics of degradation haunts all of Azadian society. Like a fractal or a hologram, Gurgeh discovers the same patterns of cruelty and humiliation everywhere he looks, from the minor points of Azadian etiquette (142, 158, 163) its systems of “justice” (147) and education (168-74), to the “common” entertainments of Azadian nightlife (195-208, 257-61), and the more select pleasures of the elite (262-6, 272-3, 278-87). The Azadian aristocrat Hamlin makes this particularly clear when he tries to discuss aesthetics with Gurgeh (278-87). In contrast to the Culture, Hamlin explains, “We have many laws [...] many crimes [...] but one of the advantages of having laws is the pleasure [the elite take in] breaking them.” Pleasure comes from transgressing the artificial horizon of a sham morality, and second, from the artificial scarcity of the ability to do so. Both aspects place the locus of outside the act itself. Hamlin sums up Azadian aesthetics in a pun on

this macabre musical atrocity: “In the Empire[,] you can be the player, or one can be ... played upon” (281). Pleasure is found not in the content of an act or experience, but in the extent to which it indexes your power over others. In these discussions, Gurgeh takes on a wry, patronizing attitude towards the Azadian’s grasping sense of desire—similar to the perspective Chamlis and Yay assumed towards his own comparatively atavistic desire.

Gurgeh’s immersion with Azadian’s aesthetics of degradation accelerated seems to have cured him of his compulsion to recast social interactions as games of dominance. By accelerating that desire—“push[ing] it to its most extreme point, follow[ing] it to its furthest and strangest consequences” (Shaviro 2)—Azadian society strips such social dominance of all nostalgia and romance. But Gurgeh hasn’t forsworn the thrill of domination completely. Gurgeh is finally comfortable demanding “not more, less [because in the Azad] I have other games to play” (236).

5.6.5.2 The Aesthetics of Strategy

While Gurgeh’s taste for any form of conflict or competition in his interaction with Azadian society diminishes, dominance remains central to his engagement with the *game* of Azad. Even as he loses interest in his official “ranking” within the Azadian system and the media coverage of his matches, “he worried that some subconscious mechanism would now let him relax a little [...] he didn’t want that; he wanted to keep going; he was enjoying all this. He wanted to find the measure of himself through this infinitely exploitable, indefinitely demanding game” (245). While the *Azadians*’ acceleration of social and sexual dominance is enough to bring them to consciousness for

Gurgeh's relation to them enough for him to shun them in his social relations with others, to really challenge *his own* investments in strategies of domination, *Gurgeh must accelerate himself*, push himself to his limits, follow his strategic proclivities to their farthest and strangest consequences. The way out is through.

The game of Azad is the engine of Gurgeh's acceleration. "Azad itself simply produced an insatiable desire for more victories, more power, more territory, more dominance" (252). Yet even as he accelerates his competitiveness within the game, Gurgeh gradually regains his awareness of the "disinterested" aesthetic experience of play that defines the Culture, existing "alongside of" the purified rush of domination, "but not a part of it" (Shaviro 25). Slowly Gurgeh embraces the aesthetics of cultivation, and learns to take it "seriously" as an aesthetics of strategy and a strategy of politics. This process has four stages, each demonstrated by extended descriptions of Gurgeh's experience during a match.

First, a game in the culture. Gurgeh's disaffection in the Culture grew out of the way that his pathological infection with atavistic masculinity—and its attendant relations of domination--caused him to lose touch with the Culture's *aesthetics of cultivation*, culminating in his choice to cheat during his match against Olz Hap. In that game, it was possible for either Olz or Gurgeh to be the first player ever to achieve a spectacular victory condition known as the Full Web. No matter which of them "won" the Full Web, *both* would be co-creators of a something rare and beautiful, emerging from *the interchange* of their strategic genius and creativity. But for Gurgeh, the disinterested aesthetic pleasure of participating in the emergence of such a sublime event is not

enough. His desire exceeds the experience of play as an end in itself, subordinating the content of the game to the extrinsic *ends* of his own fame. He cheats, hoping to secure the credit of the Full Web for himself. Instead, neither he nor Olz achieves it. His selfishness hijacks that emergent process, robbing everyone of the experience.²⁷

Ironically, the conditions of playing in the Empire serve to strip Gurgeh's play of those selfish motivations. While he exults, at first, in the ability to *openly* seek the thrill of domination as an end to competition, the games themselves hold less extrinsic value for Gurgeh than anyone he plays against. Despite their cultural reverence for the *game* of Azad, the Azadians Gurgeh faces all approach the game as a *means* towards specific material and social ends within the *Empire* of Azad. This is clearly also true of Contact's covert interest in the games Gurgeh plays. Gurgeh, however, is really, honestly only there to *play the game*. In his first few matches, Gurgeh isn't even sure he *can* play the game, let alone prove himself "the best." He just wants to play well enough to discover what is possible within the game—with victory being only one of those possibilities.

This second phase of Gurgeh's transformation is conveyed his first three extensively described matches of Azad, which emphasize Gurgeh's comparative freedom from extrinsic motivation (177-87, 210-3, 240-2). The narration contrasts Gurgeh's exploration of the possibilities inherent in the game-system with opponents whose play within the game is determined by their various external "interests" (a priest's career goals, military officers' inter-service rivalries). Gurgeh is playing *with* the game, while

²⁷ Gurgeh's choices in his game with Hap, and their sad consequences, mirror the way he sabotages his relationship with Yay. This structural echo establishes that restructuring his experience of speculative play will redeem his intimate relations as well.

they simply seek to *use* it. Gurgeh takes growing pleasure in seeing the game system manifest its potential through the exchange of moves, each player contributing to give the match its own complexly emergent character. The essence of that character remains domination, the struggle to win, but the narration of the game emphasizes Gurgeh's appreciation of the way the *beauty and pleasure* of that struggle is co-created by all the participants, winners and losers alike.

The third phase of Gurgeh's acceleration is his match against an Azadian Supreme Court judge named Bermoiya (248-250, 267-71). This match presents a challenge to Gurgeh's re-connection with the disinterested aesthetics of strategy, developed through his previous matches: it gives Gurgeh not one, but two clear extrinsic motivations for his play. First, Bermoiya stakes a wager of the body on the outcome of the match: "my bet is castration" (250). The loser of their game will be sexually mutilated, Gurgeh losing his penis and testes, Bermoiya the reversible vagina that marks the Azadian dominant sex.

Though his palms sweat and his mouth runs dry, Gurgeh accepts, initially, because his addiction to Azad outweighs his concern for his own flesh. After all, "genitalia were some of the fastest regrowing parts of the [genofixed Culture] body" (250). But after the wager is made, Gurgeh's play suffers, and he comes close to losing the game—not because of his selfish worry for his own body, but a growing empathy for his opponent:

Gurgeh had come to respect the apex's style of play, and therefore, Bermoiya himself [...] considering what would happen to the steady, stately judge if he lost, Gurgeh realized he hadn't properly thought through the implications of the physical option. Even if he [Gurgeh] did win, how could he let another be

mutilated? If Bermoiya lost, it would be the end of him; career, family, everything. The Empire did not allow the regeneration of any wager-lost body parts; the judge's loss would be permanent and possibly fatal; suicide was not unknown in such cases. Perhaps it would be best if Gurgeh did lose. (250)

The degrading, responsabilizing logic of neoliberalism, which Gurgeh confronted elsewhere in Azadian society, has finally impinged on his experience within the game. Whereas, in previous matches, the “indifference” of Gurgeh’s game experience extended to the fate of his opponents beyond the match, here he is forced to consider the consequences. While the possibility of harm to another clearly outweighs his own extrinsic desire for *safety* (he would prefer to be injured rather than another), he is less willing to risk dropping out of the tournament, losing access to the experience of the game. “He didn’t feel any personal animosity toward Bermoiya, but he desperately wanted to win this game, and the next one, and the one after that...” (251). Trapped indecisively between these impulses, Gurgeh plays poorly enough that, when the game pauses for the night, he loss seems assured.

That night, Gurgeh’s Contact handler Flere-Imsaho²⁸ intervenes in Gurgeh’s moral impasse. When Gurgeh had perceived the judge *primarily* as a respected opponent and only dimly in his function as a central figure of the Azadian regime, his extrinsic interest in their game was one of compassion. The drone puts Gurgeh’s empathy for Bermoiya into the context of the judges role in the Empire by taking Gurgeh on a graphic whistle-stop tour of Azadian social injustice and atrocity (255-265) to remind Gurgeh (and the reader) that his opponents aren’t just “a few venerable game players” but the

²⁸ Who claims to be a harmless library drone, but is, we eventually learn, the same drone who masqueraded as Mawhrin-Skel earlier in the novel, continuing his cultivation of Gurgeh’s accelerating subjectivity as part of the Mind’s plan.

authors of the same system of horror that Gurgeh hesitates to subject Bermoiya to through his victory. The drone's intervention injects this social context into Gurgeh's confrontation with Bermoiya: "what you've seen tonight is also what it's about" (265). After his hellish night out with Flere-Imsaho, Bermoiya's implication in those horrors takes center stage.

This is a new crisis for his burgeoning sense of aesthetic gameplay. How can his desire to pass judgement on the Azadian judge square with the perspective he's held so far, which has framed the competitive play experience through the language of dialog and collaboration? Can Gurgeh maintain this framing of collaborative cultivation when the contest has become explicitly political—in the sense that their game is now, at least for Gurgeh, a referendum on the legitimacy of Azadian "justice," a conflict over ideology? Or, faced with such a powerful extrinsic goal for the game, will Gurgeh revert to a purely instrumental mindset in his gameplay?

Here, *PoG* returns to the gendered political assumptions that Mawhrin-Skel's narrative had hailed in Gurgeh, and in many readers as well. Is the aesthetic of cultivation compatible with the serious work of politics? Or, when the stakes are real, must one leave playfulness behind and assume the more traditional masculine framings of violence and war, the capitalist logic of zero-sum, existential struggle? Is finance ontology, ultimately, the real language of power? On Gurgeh's reaction, on his mindset and approach to the suddenly "serious" play in this match, the legitimacy of the Culture's whole social philosophy suddenly rides.

The novel draws this tension out, narrating the conclusion of their match is entirely from *Bermoiya's* perspective. From the Azadian's viewpoint, Gurgeh's gameplay has clearly changed, but "Bermoiya couldn't see what the alien was playing at... the moves went on; inchoate, unreadable" (267). This also serves to draw out the reader's own curiosity about how Gurgeh's new political motives would manifest in the game. When Gurgeh's new strategy is revealed, the narration frames it through the language of masculine violence and war:

Bermoiya [...] had seen many violent outbursts from criminals [and] taken part in games containing moves of great suddenness and ferocity. Nevertheless, [Gurgeh's] next few moves were on a level more barbarous and wild than anything Bermoiya had witnessed, in either context [...] those few moves were like a series of kicks to the belly; they contained all the berserk energy the very best young players spasmodically exhibited; but marshalled, synchronized, sequences and unleashed with a style and savage grace (268)

This description of Gurgeh's gameplay suggests that he has indeed forsaken the aesthetics of cultivation for the logic of war and the affect of masculine rage. Yet when Bermoiya looks up from the violence of Gurgeh's play, Gurgeh's affect doesn't seem to match.

The alien stood [...] staring impassively some minor piece [...] calm, unperturbed [...] how could he look so unconcerned? [...] The male looked round at him, as though seeing him for the first time. Bermoiya felt himself stop. He gazed into the alien's eyes. And saw nothing. No Pity, no compassion, no spirit of kindness or sorrow [...] at first he thought of the look criminals had sometimes, when they'd been sentenced to a quick death [...] then he knew [...] for the first time in his life, [the judge] understood what it was for the condemned to look into *his* eyes (270).

What did Gurgeh feel as he unleashed this violence on Bermoiya, in his moves and their aftermath? The novel keeps us in the dark a little longer. Gurgeh refuses to talk about the match afterwards, and we get very little access to his interiority for the rest of the chapter.

The lingering questions about the nature of Gurgeh's changed perspective within the game, and the related issues of the political efficacy of aesthetic cultivation is deferred, are highlighted by in the interstitial first person narration²⁹ between chapters

Gurgeh['s] switches are working funny. He's thinking differently, acting uncharacteristically. He's seen the worst [of the Empire] and he just took it personally, and took his revenge [...] his head adapted and adapting to the swirling, switching patters of that seductive, encompassing, feral set of rules [...] how much has the man still got to learn? What will he make of such knowledge? More to the point, what will it make of him? [...] will our hero prevail [...] and what would constitute winning, anyway? (292)

The reader does get short descriptions of Gurgeh's next few games, in which he seems to have recovered some of his disinterested affect, thinking of his opponents as mere individuals rather than political figures, focusing on the details of each game—though more on its failure to provide the pleasure he wants, rather than appreciating what they do bring. Yet we also get Flere-Imsaho's impression of the games, and it finds

there was a callousness in [Gurgeh's] play that was new [...] the man had altered, slipped a little deeper into the game and the society [...] not the man played like [a] carnivore [...] stalking across the board, setting up [...] killing grounds, pouncing, pursuing, bringing down, absorbing... (311-2).

This sets the stage for Gurgeh's climactic final match against the Azadian Emperor Nicosar. In this game, Gurgeh finally meets his match, and must push himself as never before. Eventually he realizes that The Emperor had recreated the structure of the Empire "in every structural detail to the limits of definition the game's scale allowed," and his gameplay incarnated the Azadian logic and domination-as-degradation in similar fidelity. Gurgeh also has a corresponding revelation that in his own gameplay "he

²⁹ In what is by now a familiar warning, this voice is, ultimately, revealed to be the same drone that played the roles of Mawhrin-Skel and Flere-Imsaho, and so it must be taken with a measure of salt. This narratorial guise is as much a scheme to reform the readers' assumptions as Skel's story was for Gurgeh's—giving the reader their own subjective taste of Contact's benevolent manipulation.

habitually set up something like [the Culture] itself when he constructed his positions and deployed his pieces a net, a grid of forces and relationships, without obvious hierarchy or entrenched leadership, and initially quite profoundly peaceful” (341). The Emperor had recognized this incongruity in Gurgeh’s approach, and was using it against him.

There was [...] a ruthlessness about the way the Emperor treated his own and his opponent’s pieces [...] the Emperor was playing a rough, harsh, dictatorial, and frequently inelegant game and had rightly assumed something in a Culture man would simply not want to be part of it [...] the only barrier [Gurgeh] had to negotiate was that put up by his own feelings. He had to reply, but how? Become the Culture? Another Empire? How do you match an Emperor as an Imperialist? (342-3).

This positions the game not only the climax of the plot, but as the ultimate test of the underlying political question of the novel: can aesthetic cultivation function as a base for *all* social action, not just the hedonistic pleasures of domestic relations, but the serious work of politics as well? Or must the superstructure of utopia always rest on a base of instrumental competition. Does the Culture escape the horizon of finance ontology, or not?

Searching for his “reply,” Gurgeh knows only that he must push past “his own feelings” of horror at the violence inherent in playing the game to win. Thought the novel, he had relished the thrill of winning as an *end* to his games, but within the game he desired to play it *well*, to demonstrate his mastery of its possibilities. He wanted an aesthetic experience of strategy without acknowledging that, while he plays with(in) the Empire, it must necessarily encompass an aesthetic experience of war.

Gurgeh accepts that in *this* game, against *this* opponent, domination, while only one possibility to be cultivated is the one that he must *fully embrace* to win. In doing so,

he finally accelerates to escape velocity. We can see this complex transformation in his experience of the game through the language of the novel uses throughout the match. On one hand, the narration of Gurgeh's experience of the game borders on the ecstasy of *futurismo*:

The board became both Culture and Empire [...] the setting made by them both; a glorious, beautiful, deadly killing field, unsurpassably fine and sweet and predatory and carved from Nicosar's beliefs and his together [...] burning like a standing wave of fire [...] a perfect map of thought and faith (348-9).

Yet Gurgeh's sense of his opponent never takes on the bloodthirsty aspect of the spectacle of violence they create together. Instead, Gurgeh perceives the struggle between their very different but equally powerful strategic intellects as an "exquisitely textured exchange of mood and feeling (349). In the course of the game, Gurgeh's sense of intimacy extends beyond Nicosar to encompass the game-system of Azad, and more importantly, the unique emergent experience that is the match itself, which he perceives as taking on an agency of its own. Together, they

spoke a strange language, sang a strange song that was at once a perfect set of harmonies and a battle to control the writing of the themes [creating] a single huge organism; the pieces seemed to move with will that was neither his nor the Emperor's, but something dictated finally by the game itself, an ultimate expression of its essence." (345)

Gurgeh leaves behind all individual ends. He no longer plays to establish his personal masculine dominance over his opponent, or to buttress his own self-image by proving himself "the best." Gurgeh flings himself into the final match—pushing himself to the limits of his health and sanity—to participate in and bear witness to the game's "expression of its essence." He is trying to win—the result is still an end for Gurgeh—but that "serious" political end will be cultivated not just alongside, but *through* the beauty

and complexity of the play itself. The extrinsic ends add to *but do not replace* the end of aesthetic cultivation—an aesthetics of *power* that can be both ethical and effective at once.

In this sense, Gurgeh's profound sense of grief when he realizes he has won the match is the most important and most utopian moment of the book. "It was not finished, but it was over. A terrible sadness swamped him, took hold of him like a piece and made him sway and nearly fall" (350). Rather than thrilling at his victory, at his possession of the domination that was the guiding theme of the whole experience, he mourns for complex emergent "organism" that was the game itself ("his—their—beautiful game, over; dead"), its uniqueness and beauty as valuable as its extrinsic effects. Further, he mourns the end of the intimacy he felt with Nicosar, which existed "alongside, but apart from" his antipathy for the Emperor, his politics and values. Within the game, Gurgeh could respect Nicosar as an opponent and love what they made together, even as he despised the man himself and all that he played for, practically, morally and politically.

Despite the exuberantly violent language that characterizes much of their play in the match, the strategy that ultimately wins the game for Gurgeh recreates the Culture's ethos of cultivation on the board itself. In Gurgeh's final stratagem, "the Culture had become the Empire, the Empire the barbarians." This moment is often misinterpreted by critics, who read this as a confirmation that the "barbaric" violence of Gurgeh's gameplay had supplanted his Culture values. The opposite is the case here. Banks employs "Empire" as a loaded metaphor here. What the Culture assumes is not the sadistic neoliberal ferocity of the Azadian Empire, but an older humanist myth of Roman

civilization, reworked in the form of a trap: the idea that even when an empire falls and barbarians move in to occupy it,

the architecture of the system channels [the barbarians], beguiles them, seduces and transforms them, demanding from them what they could not before have given but slowly grow to offer. The empire survives, the barbarians survive, but the empire is no more and the barbarians are nowhere to be found. (351)

As Gurgeh showed, there is an “ethos of the Culture militant” (344), which can meet an opponent in conventional warfare and realize the terrible, beautiful potentials of that deadly game. But here Gurgeh has built the logic of acceleration into the game itself, turning the aggression of the Emperor against itself, leading not to extermination but transformation. For both Gurgeh and Nicosar, this strategy demands a “death-change; they could not survive as there were” (351) Transcending the logic of mutual genocide, Gurgeh manipulates the system to cultivate something new.³⁰

The extent to which this disinterested experience of aesthetic of strategy as mutual cultivation conflicts with the competitive investments of traditional, individualist masculinity Gurgeh exemplified at the opening of the narrative is evident in the intensely gendered language Nicosar uses to express his disgust with Gurgeh’s game-play: “you treat this battle-game like some filthy dance. It is there to be fought and struggled against, and you’ve attempted to seduce it [...] You know no pride, or glory, or worship. You have power [...] but you’re still impotent” (357-8).³¹ Like Mawhrin-Skel in the opening

³⁰ It is this subversion of the logic of dominance-as-degradation Nicosar contributed to their game, the way Gurgeh “channels” their collective effort towards an end other than annihilation, that I think Gurgeh means when he things that “nothing so complex, and so beautiful had ever been seen on the Azad board” (349).

³¹ The Emperor’s invocation of pride, glory, and worship echoes the almost religious sense of validation many financial traders experience when their “calls” beat the market: not only have their “won” in terms of accumulating more capital, but they gain “a sense of mastery and transcendence,” a fleeting moment of

of the novel, and Za towards the middle, Nicosar draws on the language of language of procreative dominance—impotence and castration—in an attempt to hail Gurgeh. This time, however, that masculinist rhetoric plucks no strings in Gurgeh’s queerly accelerated subjectivity. Instead, Gurgeh marvels that his partner in creating beauty within the game had closed himself off from the experience they shared—just as Gurgeh had closed himself off from his relationships at home.

Gurgeh’s approach to Azad in this final game—as an act of intense, meaning-ridden intimacy—is precisely the perspective that the Culture has worked so hard to normalize by investing so much thought *and* infrastructure in facilitating life as serious play. Gurgeh’s *affect* during and after the game, then, shows that politics—in the sense of engaging in a competitive struggle with other actors to achieve conflicting ends, or define divergent meanings for events—doesn’t preclude either the aesthetics of cultivation *or* the structure of play. To the extent that Gurgeh’s strategic ability functions in the narrative as a synecdoche for the speculative agency of the Minds, his experience in this final match shows that the Culture’s ethos of cultivation and play extend all the way *up* as well as all the way down. The ethics of intervention and cultural imperialism remain fraught, but *The Player of Games* shows that the Minds of Contact approach even the least utopian activities according to the same ethos of cultivation with structures the best of the Culture.

“God’s grace” (Wosnitzer 270). Of course, in light of Nicosar’s own self-immolation, I also hear the cries of “witness me!” by Immortan Joe’s half-life war boys in *Fury Road* (Miller 2015).

5.6.5.3 Homecoming

In his game against Nicosar, Gurgeh has finally fully reconnected with the ethos of “disinterested” but mutual aesthetic cultivation that makes the Culture’s utopian social, sexual, and political relations possible. This reading of section two's climax helps us interpret the emphatic uneventful-ness of the third act, which as long troubled readers and critics.

Gurgeh’s “uncharacteristic” affects in the closing section has similarly been read as depression deriving from his sense of being manipulated and “outplayed” by contact. This is, as argued above, precisely the meaning of the ending in the 1979 draft, but I think it not true of the published text. This is not to deny the melancholy tone of the final section, or the sources of genuine sadness for Gurgeh it contains. It is just important to see this sadness as arising from a sense of transition rather than defeat.

Gurgeh is “morose” during his trip home, and requests to spend most of it in suspended animation; “he wanted sleep, rest, a period of oblivion” (382). As a game-player, the engrossing complexity of Azad in general, and the masterful, emotionally intense game he played with Nicosar in particular, provided peak experiences he is unlikely to ever surpass. At a deeper level, within Gurgeh’s final strategy of transformational acceleration, *both sides* were transformed. “They could not survive as they were” (351). Just as the match ultimately unraveled Nicosar and his Empire, it unravels the last of the “barbarian” in Gurgeh, the atavistic nostalgia for domination that had given his game-playing its compulsive nature. In his moment of victory, this drive—accelerated, pushed to its utmost in that final game—is the “something [that] left Gurgeh,

just ebbed away, burned out, relaxing its grip on him” (351). He mourns, then, not just for the complex game he left behind in the Empire, but the pathological relation to competition he left behind as well.

Yet this period of mourning and despondency on the ship is qualitatively different than general passiveness and pensiveness he displays once he arrives home, back in the company of Yay and Chamlis. Here his “passivity” is more the deliberate silence of self-reflection and receptiveness, a conscious not-doing that demonstrates that he has finally understood what he needed to do all along was just relax and accept the reality of the Culture’s social abundance, rather than scheming to make every moment, every interaction, the occasion for a showy triumph. He is attentive but receptive, letting them take the lead in conversation and set the tone for the interaction. In the earlier drafts, they talk at length about his adventure and the “lessons” he was meant to learn. Here he turns the conversation back to them and their affective networks, to Hafflis and Olz Hap and the University crew. In doing so, he demonstrates the lessons he learned, seeking cultivation rather than conquest, relaxing enough see what happens rather than trying to *force* something to happen.

Gurgeh’s seemingly abrupt romantic reconnection with Yay in the final pages of the novel, which many readers find pat and unsatisfying, should not be read in terms of “reward” or “victory,” but as evidence of the depth of Gurgeh’s transformation. The only thing that kept Yay and Gurgeh apart was his need to *compel* her to intimacy, which prevented him from appreciating the intimacy she was trying to cultivate with him all

along. Thus, in this final sequence, it is Yay who asks to stay the night: “Gurgeh looked, surprised, at her smiling face, and nodded” (389).

The language of their sexual consummation at the close of the book cements the link between Gurgeh’s revelations in the final match and his changed social demeanor back home: “making her laugh, laughing with her and—in the long moment of climax—with her then too, still one, their every tactile cell surging to a single pulse” (389). Though this ending ultimately grounds the ethos of cultivation in the romantic couple, Yay is in the midst of gender transition, short-circuiting subsumption of their pleasure into the reproductive futurity of straight sex. The sensual descriptions of Gurgeh caressing Yay’s queerly protean “forming body” and “concaving genitals” evoke, instead, the utopian futurity of Muñoz’s queerness to come, whose unfolding they will cultivate together amidst the Culture’s ecstatically quotidian abundance.

5.6.6 “I made the game real”: Contact’s Game of Acceleration and Cultivation

As in the original draft, Gurgeh’s progress through the novel has been part of a larger Contact scheme. Without Gurgeh’s knowledge, they have informed the Emperor that if he loses to Gurgeh, the Culture will start a full-scale invasion. In effect, the game serves as a simulation of how such a conflict would play out. Gurgeh’s symbolic victory, then, becomes a literal one as Nicosar attempts to destroy himself and his Empire before the Culture can take it. “I made the game real,” he boasts to a shocked Gurgeh as his final moves on the board are matched by explosions around them. He intended such a spectacle of self-immolation to serve as a last act of heroic egotism, proof that he understands pride and glory as the hedonistic Culture never can. The actual result was a

kind of auto-coup, decapitating the Azadian state and opening the space for the Azadians to start making change for themselves. As Flere-Imsaho explains

Everything worked out a little more dramatically than we'd expected, I must admit, but it looks like all the analysis of your abilities and Nicosar's weaknesses were just about right. My respect for those minds which use the likes of you and me like game-pieces increases all the time.

In the 1979 draft, the revelation that he had been a piece played by Contact is devastating for Gurgeh, because in that version's logic of power—the logic his own play in the final game revealed—such manipulation vitiated his own identity and retroactively robbed him of his sense of agency. In the final text, both the ethical situation and Gurgeh's response to it are more complex. Having just used the stratagem of transformative acceleration on Nicosar, he couldn't help but recognize Contact's use of it to transform him.

Much of the novel's impact comes from the challenge of reconciling this dual purpose of Gurgeh's mission, which disrupts the toxic capitalist masculinism that tainted both Azadian culture and Gurgeh's own gendered subjectivity in a single precisely calibrated stroke. The AIs of the Culture interweave their scheme to restructure a society of millions with a therapeutic drama organized to effect the redemption and self-actualization of a single one of its own disaffected citizens.

Taken on its own, the Minds' manipulation of Gurgeh "for his own good" can seem patronizing and imperious. However, if one of the goals of the book is to help the reader understand the Mind's perspective on their management of the Culture's domestic and foreign policy, we must consider how the Minds' ethics of care interact with the other aspects of Gurgeh's—and readers'—assumptions about the Minds that the text seeks to "correct." Using Gurgeh's climactic experience in his final game of Azad as the

model for the Minds' experience of speculative cultural management as play, we can see that, domination is not the end of their practice, but rather the aesthetic cultivation of possibility. Further, we see that it is *mutual cultivation*, encompassing not only the development of the self, but also is an ethics of affection for, care of, and whenever possible, a kind of nurturant care towards ones' "pieces."³²

While the resulting picture of the Minds' relations to humans as fusion of speculative strategy, personnel management, social engineering, and therapeutic intervention is certainly problematic in many ways, if we take the AI's labor of care seriously, the Minds' relationship with Gurgeh is *not exploitative* because they work for Gurgeh's gain as much as he works for theirs. When an aesthetics of cultivation defines one's approach to strategic speculation, Gurgeh's agency is not *fully* precorporated by the Minds. Even if Gurgeh wasn't aware of all the ways that they cultivated the situation in which he acted, he still *shares in* the meaning he created together with them in their collaboration to create the results.

Thus, while the Culture Minds' aesthetics of strategic cultivation resembles the financial logic of financial speculation in several senses, it works to imagine a very different relationship between agency, possibility, and futurity. When they set subjects and events in motion, the Minds seek not to premeditate or precorporate the future, to "deplete the future in advance" as capital does, stealing the vitality of the future to feed present accumulation. While the Minds assess risks and calculate optimal possible futures, they

³² He might look back, for instance, on the moment when, during Gurgeh's initial training in the game of Azad, the Minds suggest he sleep with his "arms cradled around [one of the organic pieces] as though it were a tiny baby" so that he can better understand and appreciate its role in the game (129).

don't seek to *determine* those outcomes so much as to *grow them*, to foster a system that "channels them, beguiles them, seduces and transforms ... demands from them what they could not before have given but slowly grow to offer" (350).

5.7 Conclusion Cultivating Radical Technologies of Speculation

In *No Speed Limit*, Steven Shaviro argues that "Accelerationism needs to be an aesthetic program first, before it can be a political one" (21). In *The Player of Games*, Banks provides us with both. Rather than acquiescing to finance capital's foreclosure of the future, *The Player of Games* subverts the transhumanist fantasy of early adoption inherent in most power management fiction by *inverting it* into an obsolescence narrative. Gurgeh is set up as an exceptional protagonist, chosen for his "special" powers of speculative competition. But while Gurgeh's political mission hinges on his speculative abilities and his atavistic masculinity, that mission doubles as a personal quest that will estrange Gurgeh—and the reader—from these very powers and that subjectivity. Yet while the novel challenges the foundations of finance ontology—scarcity, inequality, and competition—it does not repudiate technologies of speculation themselves. Rather, Banks asks us to imagine how such technology might be rearticulated, build up anew from an egalitarian foundation of queer cultivation and abundance.

Banks's project, then, aligns with the politics of left accelerationism which, as Shaviro notes, "seek to capture [neoliberal] capitalism's most advanced and intensive technologies" and use them to create public rather than private wealth (Shaviro 16). Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek argue that, like other neoliberal innovations, the technologies of speculation and risk "are not exhausted by the goals under which they have initially

been developed, and for which they are currently used” (qtd in *No Speed Limit* 17). But, as Shaviro notes, changing the *goals* of such tech doesn’t necessarily challenge the masculine discourses of mastery and domination embedded in the discourse of “use”—as we can see in the difficulty readers, and even Banks himself, have in leaving behind our assumption—like the Azadians’—that to play, someone else must be played. Within the imagination of use, then, we can only produce a left-branded version of the old masculine fantasy of “maximal “mastery.”

To escape this impasse, Shaviro argues that humans must find ways to “engage in alliances with our tools... rather than seeing them as extensions of our wills” (20). *Player of Games* speaks directly to this radical premise, imagining relationships of mutual responsibility and affection between organic, machinic, and virtual beings, relationships organized within a guiding aesthetic of cultivation: humanity cultivating technology that will cultivate us in turn, regarding each other not as tools for self-expansion, but as allies in a perpetual making-present of utopian futurity.

Coda:
Cultivating Hope

In his review essay on Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*, Todd Hoffman warns that despite the analytical incisiveness of Fisher's description of our entrapment within and precorporation by the finance ontology of capital, his vision of a capitalist realism that "seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable" is so totalizing that it can lead to the same paralyzation and "reflexive impotence" that, as a critical concept, it was meant to help us apprehend. The danger in probing as deeply as Fisher does, and as I have here, into the pressures neoliberalism puts on subject and society is that one feels the call of what Benjamin called "left melancholia," whose symptoms in our times Hoffman concisely defines as the fatalistic conviction that

one can only look on with a cynical distance, maintaining a knowledge and belief in the evils of capitalism as the only feasible stance, a kind of weary resignation, even as one participates in the very structures of capitalism [whose injustice one strives to remain ever-conscious of] ("No Exit," np)

I closed this project with the utopian aestheticism of Banks, Shaviro, and Muñoz because they offer a powerful antidote to such melancholia. Rather than obsessively scanning the false horizon of capitalist realism, yearning to sight some not-yet-foreclosed future, utopian aesthetics reminds us of the radical possibility of our power of "making-present" the utopia we desire. The aesthetics of cultivation, in which we don't merely master or consume, but enter into alliances with each other, our technology, and our pleasure, offers an alternative to the familiar cycle of transgression and excess, subversion and recuperation. The emergent pleasures of utopian aesthetics offer us not

the nostalgic return of what has been lost, or the sublime shock of what is radically new,
but rather the hope that, together, we might discover what we need.

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