

# *Introduction: How Do Novels Think about Neoliberalism?*

JOHN MARX AND NANCY ARMSTRONG

The fourth biennial conference of the Society for Novel Studies was held at the University of Pittsburgh in May 2016 under the leadership of Jonathan Arac, then SNS vice president. *Novel* sponsored British novelist Tom McCarthy as the keynote speaker, and he agreed to let us publish both his talk and his provocative interview with Nicholas Huber. Members of the editorial board selected four additional papers from the conference that, in their view, shed new light on the relationship between the novel and neoliberalism. The remaining papers in this issue are based on invited talks from symposia held at Duke and Brown Universities that focused on the contemporary novel, critical theory, and the curious relationship these two modes of writing have taken up in the past half century. All the essays went through the journal's standard review process.

To introduce this special issue, we chose two essays that frame the largely unstated question that the collection as a whole addresses: McCarthy's keynote talk, "Vanity's Residue," which leans heavily on certain novels as a mode of critical theoretical writing, and Dierdra Reber's "A Tale of Two Marats," which leans just as heavily on the explanatory logic of political-economic theory as McCarthy does on that of novels. Together, these essays ask us to consider how major contemporary novelists have changed the novel's "partition of the sensible . . . which," according to Jacques Rancière, "allows (or does not allow) some data to appear" (11). Is this alteration of the reader's formal expectations a matter of course—an expression of the generic obligation of the novel to violate the established novel form, however one construes it? Or do the formal features that distinguish novels written in the last thirty years or so alter that obligation itself? Should we consider the variations that encourage us to identify certain novels with "neoliberalism" as variations of the novel as a genre—or do they amount to a different order of difference that in turn amounts to a different set of generic requirements? If the latter, then can we say that the novels now being written for a global audience are breaking with the novel form itself and dissolving the contract, which changes those expectations—including that of the element of surprise—that readers bring to novel reading?

Reber and McCarthy are of one mind that the turn in political and novel history now attributed to neoliberalism has actually been three centuries in the making. Reber begins with the concept of *laissez-faire* coined by the mid-eighteenth-century Physiocrats who argued that the economy should be free of regulations to develop according to its own natural law. She shows how that principle derives energy from its opposition ("abhorrence" is her word) to a form of vertical authority that describes itself as rational. Her account holds the vertical authority of empire responsible for curbing the horizontal drive of *laissez-faire* until the end of the Cold War period, when neoliberalism emerged from the collapse of vertical authority. She sees Trumpery as symptomatic of this collapse: "In a cultural climate dominated by

laissez-faire logic, fact and truth and rational critique and judgment must cede . . . to opinion and affective preference.”

McCarthy’s keynote situates his work in a long history that goes back to the novels of Laurence Sterne and from there to Herman Melville, Lewis Carroll, and the quirkier works of modernism by Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, and Samuel Beckett. These novelists all exceed the limitations of the generic form, and each does so in a *sui generis* style. McCarthy implies that some kind of leap separates his own fiction from that of Thomas Pynchon in terms of the novelist’s inability to offer a future beyond the world of multinational capitalism. Having argued that the recent turn in the history of the novel was three centuries in the making, he ends up in much the same cul-de-sac as Reber. What is so new about their situation, aside from the fact that it takes a pair of revisionary histories to explain the relationship between the novel and the political-economic conditions that limit the possibilities of imagining a future?

According to Reber, both Left and Right have unleashed an abhorrence of vertical authority that formal hierarchies had for centuries contained and sublimated. Rather than expose the limitations of vertical authority, such unchecked antagonism has exposed the historical complicity of radical democracy and laissez-faire economic policy. The dissolution of the difference between the two means that the concept of radical democracy no longer provides a true alternative to government by multinational corporations.

The fact that McCarthy thinks with and through the novel would seem to put him at an advantage in this situation, were the endings of his novels, like that of his keynote address, not so “fucking weird” (*Satin Island* 203). Having discarded all possibility of a future beyond or outside what seems a limitless economic order, McCarthy’s keynote ends with the baleful figure of the writer as a dying man “[s]et aside in one of the technical and secret zones (hospitals, prisons, refuse dumps) which relieve the living of everything that might hinder the chain of production and consumption” (Certeau 191). Borrowed from the conclusion of Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*, this figure claims for writing something like the power that Raymond Williams ascribes to “the residual” and that McCarthy attributes to writing that can “in the darkness where no one wants to penetrate, repair and select what can be sent back up to the surface of progress.” It seems to us that McCarthy uses this figure to reject the generic promise of the novel—just as Reber dismisses the promise of liberal democracy—on grounds that yearning for a more radical democratic future extends “the chain of production and consumption.”

We find it interesting that both essays feature garbage pickers as surrogates for the contemporary artist: the anthropologist narrator of McCarthy’s *Satin Island* (2015) collects bits of information from people’s lives for a mysterious megacorporation, where Reber’s protagonist, Vik Muniz, is a Brazilian-born and Brooklyn-based photographer of images composed of material from Latin America’s biggest dump, the equivalent of no less than 244 American football fields. A team of *catadores*, garbage pickers who make a living by sorting out recyclable materials, assembles the images in Muniz’s *Waste Land* series. Noting how the reproduction of *The Death of Marat* in this debris field exploits the radical horizontality captured in the luminous martyred body of the original, Reber balks at pronouncing Muniz’s

image a “redemptive portrait” simply because it pays tribute to Jacques-Louis David’s revolutionary painting. The photograph’s celebration of the *catadores*’ entrepreneurial energy, in her view, has all too much in common with the argument of small-government advocates who link happiness to economic freedom.

Like McCarthy, Reber sees her task as penetrating the “partition of the sensible” for purposes of making visible some of the information that our master narratives have filtered out. Exposing this “waste” product of writing does not bring about some kind of transformation, in either view—much less one that points beyond writing. At best, both novelist and political theorist perform “a resurrection that does not restore to life” (Certeau 193). This raises a number of important questions about the relation of the novel to neoliberalism, which we pose and reflect on dialogically.

NANCY ARMSTRONG: If what we mean by *neoliberalism* is a culture marked by the collapse of the categories of liberalism (democracy/class hierarchy; democratic writing/literary genres; freedom/subjection), then does that collapse explain why post-WWII novels refuse to hold out “happy horizontality” as the resolution to the individual’s struggle for self-recognition under dehumanizing conditions? A number of essays in this collection seem to be searching for something more: something in the way of an alternative to the opposition that has occasioned this struggle for more than two centuries, an opposition that might yield a new antithesis. Do you think any of these essays manages to formulate an alternative that allows us to think about recent novels in terms that can’t be boiled down to the opposition between vertical authority and happy horizontality?

JOHN MARX: Well, Jane Elliott sure wants such an alternative. She thinks that in becoming universal, microeconomics has left us with no way to distinguish among different kinds of human actors and to privilege some as good and others as bad; terrorists and antiterrorists play the same kinds of microeconomic games. What do you think of the way these essays talk about tactics and strategy? Is that another kind of binary? I’m thinking of Rachel Greenwald Smith’s suggestion that the novel today fetishizes stylistic and formal innovation without attention to the ideological big picture. Or Lily Saint’s interest in how the contemporary novel conscripts its readers into networks of responsibility that are actually kind of irresponsible or that lack a strategic vision capable of providing a context for evaluating what it means to be responsible to this person rather than to that one. Does this sound different to you or like more of the same?

NA: I’m suspicious of the sudden overuse of “tactics” and “strategy,” as formulated in Michel de Certeau’s *Practices of Everyday Life* of thirty years ago. A number of the essays in our collection seem to be caught in the affective undertow of horizontality that Reber identifies with *laissez-faire*, and I find it telling that McCarthy concludes his argument not with a passage from the oft-quoted chapter “Walking in the City” but with a passage from the conclusion to Certeau’s book titled “The Unnamable.” If, as the earlier and more cheerful chapter suggests, tactics and strategy are mutually dependent sides of the opposition submission/domination, then, Certeau concludes, tactics can’t very well unseat strategy without becoming exactly

that. Would you say that in taking up this figure, McCarthy agrees with Reber that the collapse of strategy and tactics characterizes the present (neoliberal) moment? As for Elliott, when she calls attention to the upsurge of popular novels and films that turn the prisoner's dilemma game into a "microeconomic mode," can we say that she shows how this collapse occurs? The James Franco film *127 Hours* provides Elliott's bluntest example of how the collapse of strategy and tactics plays out at the level of the individual. Doesn't cutting off an arm save the individual's life by compromising the individual's autonomy? This would seem to eradicate the difference between tactics and strategy. Smith suggests that Rachel Kushner does the same thing in *The Flamethrowers*, when her photographer protagonist relinquishes her power of selective vision and embraces a "compromise aesthetics" that allows authoritarianism to flourish.

JM: If there is strategy in these examples, it operates at a scale seemingly beyond the reach of any individual actor even as, to follow Elliott, the "fierce determination" of the individual as microdecision maker takes center stage. Smith's compromise aesthetics is all tactics and no strategy, the victory of Francis Fukuyama's "endless solving of technical problems" (18). The formulation requires subjects capable of figuring out how to cut off their own arms but not how to run their own countries. As for how this dynamic came about, Smith wants us to note that strategy is still out there, even if it is not for us. "For a generation," she writes, "we have aspired to empty ourselves of collective forms of political ideology and intentional forms of authority." The result is that "we forget that there are authors" of the discourses that operate through us. Authors, but not novelists, at least not according to McCarthy, who locates himself as author in a situation comparable to the characters in the novels considered in this special issue. His novelist appears more adept at assessing and navigating the contemporary world than his readers, but no one is making claims for his novels' capacity to do very much to change it.

NA: I have to address that claim indirectly. I see McCarthy posing the Kafka problem in his bleak conclusion, which defines the writer's position as intolerable in the same way that solitary confinement is, with neither realistic possibilities of escape nor credible possibilities of transcendence. Why do twenty-first-century novelists put themselves in the same neither/nor position as that of Kafka? Sure, it lets them do a great job of turning the apparatuses confining them into the literary machinery of a monstrous government that authors them, but is that all there is to it? I realize, of course, that ours are very different times than Kafka's. Nevertheless, so many of the novelists who now interest me claim to descend from him and Beckett that there must be something for them in this state of being overpowered. I think they know that the bottom, so to speak, is more powerful than the top, because the top is actually not in charge. Matthew Hart's identification of the "extraordinary" event that cracks open the "enclave" form of J. G. Ballard's "late" novels is an obvious case in point. Jeanne-Marie Jackson's claim that the novels now coming out of Zimbabwe offer an "agonistic pluralism" strikes me as the counterpart to Hart's reading of the "extraordinary" event as a version of the same force-counterforce dynamic. If you buy that comparison, would it be all that

much of a stretch to say that a novel like Dambudzo Marechera's *The House of Hunger* explains why it's impossible for novels aimed at global readership to achieve the unity, autonomy, and consensus that seem to provoke eruptions of apocalyptic violence in *Super-Cannes* and *Millennium People*? Would you say that Jackson and Emilio Sauri extend or overturn the postcolonial critique of European realism as informed by a wish for political autonomy and internal consensus? In focusing on the present moment, do Jackson and Sauri ask us to change the way we read the novels written in the former colonies?

JM: Yes and no. There's definitely something in Jackson and Sauri of the stock (and correct!) postcolonial literary critic's assertion that reading novels from outside the increasingly well-consecrated anglophone canon can provide a bracing reminder of the larger world. Jackson's essay might be read as doubling down on this rhetoric, inasmuch as it seeks a criticism capable of "digging deeper to grapple with locally and narratively emplaced structures of debate." Sauri, though, wants us to discern something abstract and global in Yuri Herrera's "attentiveness to setting," which "not only presupposes the existence of a society governed by abstract laws, structures, and functions but also signals the degree to which the novel is unthinkable without it." Neither critic is more confident than any of the other scholars in this issue that the contemporary novel is capable of acting on the world, however. Maybe it can help us imagine an alternate future (Sauri) or encourage us to keep several competing perspectives in our heads at the same time (Jackson). For all that these are accomplishments, they also seem like weak tea in comparison to the grand claims the novel was capable of sustaining in an earlier moment of postcolonial criticism.

NA: OK, I give, but know that it's my training in the great tradition of James and Conrad that makes me do so. What if we say that the material culture filtered out of classic political-economic and novelistic discourse as waste or garbage has something like an immanent vitalism—and that the jarring introduction of this material revitalizes a form and discourse stuck in a repetition compulsion (aka modernism). Gregor Samsa's bedroom/garbage dump serves as my own theoretical model for this formal behavior. Doesn't the rediscovery of incredible excess, or waste, produced by a form (the novel) at the heart of the discourse of "normal" modern life open up a space (the dump) where novels are relieved of the obligation to formulate an elsewhere?

JM: I like this formulation a good deal. If dumpster diving is what gives recent novels a sense of purpose, would you say it also gives them a politics? What you say could look truly like old-school bricolage—and Reber's second Marat suggests that—with all the theoretical sophistication and aesthetic pretension therein. But it could also look like the rather more ambivalent entrepreneurial practice that is colloquially associated with austerity, turning crises into opportunities, and the like. Maybe it's both? In which case, how do we tell the two apart?

NA: Point taken. I am a sucker for old-fashioned "bricolage," preferring it to the overused term "pastiche," or what often strikes me as parody without purpose. It seems to me that McCarthy rules out the possibility of such entrepreneurial recycling in *Satin Island*, when he makes his protagonist a belated Lévi-Strauss who

halfheartedly collects endless amounts of information about consumer practices for a mysterious global corporation. Reber does the same in pointing out how Muniz unwittingly colludes with the neoliberal right (as Trump's base does with wealthy donors) by asking us to celebrate horizontality for its own sake. On the other hand, how do you deal with the fact that both she and McCarthy reject the redemptive or reparative possibilities of "dumpster diving" as the means of fulfilling the generic obligation to produce a moralized, healthy, or potentially normative (masculine?) alternative. Both seem to take a form of pleasure—at once infantile and sophisticated—in texts like this. I like to think of this as the emergence of a residual pleasure, the pleasure we gave up for the delayed gratification of mastering difficulty in classic works of modernism.

JM: Although it takes a weird form, this is the seductive pleasure of technical expertise, isn't it? Indulging it might offer another way of understanding these essays, inasmuch as they respond to horizontality by directing our attention to talent, however impotent or retro-modernist. We might imagine these essays as daring us to offer a hierarchical scheme worth supporting, once they have persuaded us that horizontality is a sham.

NA: Are you willing to see the contemporary novel as the emergence of a long tradition of novels that recycle "trash"? That would seem to explain why the novels McCarthy names are so different (*sui generis*) and nevertheless boil down to the same thing: that is, letting the novel be the novel. Do you have another way of explaining why our moment has experienced one of the great outbursts of formal innovation in the history of the novel? I haven't found contemporary economic theory especially helpful in explaining why a broad swath of these novels goes deliberately off the rails, but I think you're onto something with the concept of "talent," though talent that finds expression in and through technology versus a very different concept of talent as in "tradition and the individual talent." A very different virtuosity that brings some rigor to the term *sui generis*.

JM: Presume we buy it: there is a long tradition of "garbage novels" running back to the eighteenth century that acquires something like the status of a coherent genre in our present, or, as you put it, a broad swath of seemingly *sui generis* novels that seem to be doing the same thing. Isn't this what the history of genres looks like? In other words, scattered experiments in what will someday be the "garbage novel" that all of a sudden begin to cohere as a recognizable literary category. If that seems an apt amendment to the proposition, one follow-up question for me would be: What is the status of this genre among the full range of genres in our present? Is the "garbage novel" the one genre to rule them all? Is it to our moment as the *bildungsroman* was to the second half of the nineteenth century, or whatever? Or is this a minor fiction, the stuff of academic intrigue rather than the kind of novelistic power you, among others, have located in earlier centuries?

NA: For the sake of argument, I refuse to think of the tradition of "aberrant" or "garbage" novels as a generic innovation bent on revising readers' expectations for the purpose of dominating the global book market. I grant that what you say might

very well come true someday, but I think we are in a position now to see that it's way more complicated—and interesting—than that. I have an abiding attachment to Williams's notion of an emergent form as a residual social formation to which "a structure of feeling," one that couldn't be formulated as such at an earlier moment in time, suddenly congeals stuff—extra material that doesn't feel like much of anything—so that it finds formal expression in fiction. Great traditions, like those of Ian Watt and F. R. Leavis, pretend to march forward in time, bringing past formulations up to date. You and I have done our bits to realign that kind of tradition for postcolonialism and feminism, respectively. But I have yet to hear of anyone, least of all McCarthy, who wants to line up Sterne, Carroll, Conrad's *Secret Agent*, or Pynchon in such a progressive history. I go along with Giorgio Agamben's definition of "the contemporary" in only one respect, that this concept snaps the spine of prevailing cultural historical narratives and forces us to search the not yet sensible areas of the past for makings of a history of the present. Williams would add that the novels of the day always look to certain past novels as the archive of residual material, material in excess of meaning. As for a minor literature, I completely buy the idea that Kafka's "minority" status as a novelist is not only the claim of so many novelists and philosophers (most notably Gilles Deleuze) who see him as their predecessor but also what Kafka was striving for. Don't you think, though, that sheer quantity changes everything? If the growing number of his successors displace the tradition that minoritized Kafka, then these novelists could not be major as opposed to minor but have (here we go again) invalidated that binary. Instead of one tradition, couldn't we say these novelists are restarting many different strands of history that have to be understood as more of a web than a road?

JM: I 100 percent agree that quantity changes everything. We could use someone with better computational chops than you or I possess to tell us how prevalent the "garbage novel" is, but knowing would not necessarily alter my assessment of how interesting it is. I even think I'd agree, although maybe grudgingly, that were we to discover that the "garbage novel" prevails mostly in academy-friendly global fiction, this fact would not make it any less intriguing. In short, I see no more advantage than you do in reinstalling a minor/major, core/periphery, margin/center schema. And yet, Kafka. I would be super happy to see a genealogy that did not rely so heavily on the Euro-American canon, including its minor figures. The gauntlet has been thrown: more non-Euro-American precedents for contemporary "garbage fiction" wanted.

NA: I can't say exactly when, much less why, I stopped imagining literary history as a discourse that claims to march forward irreversibly in time. I do know that it was about the same time that I became aware of a tendency I shared with my best students and closest colleagues. I was always getting sucked into the novel's drive for freedom (from generic restrictions, or whatever) and thus becoming subject to its emotional undertow: Reber's expanded definition of *laissez-faire*? Have the limits of the literary institution prompted novel criticism and theory to revise its historical and generic categories? Or can we blame "the novel" for recruiting us to look to horizontality as the political alternative to vertical authority? Are you suggesting that by way of taking me to task for my thing with Kafka?

JM: I think this is spot-on and invokes the question of politics I posed earlier. I would love to place the burden for this tendency of contemporary literary criticism on the novel form, although I hesitate to make us the victims of a plot from which we too might someday be free. I've always preferred formulations in which the question of freedom is less absolute, and I think that I've received a good deal of help in thinking about that from novels. I'll spare you my inclination to rattle off a list of novels that forgo absolutist terms for thinking about being free and being governed. Instead, let me ask you whether you think of this as primarily an aesthetic effect or a question of plot, to the extent that you'd be willing to differentiate between these two. In other words, is the freedom from genre invoking a high/low distinction? Fancy experimental novels are freer? Or is this a problem about the stories that novels tell?

NA: You certainly weaseled out of my previous question, but since you asked: for me the evidence suggests otherwise. I find Nathan K. Hensley persuasive when he shows how McCarthy's preoccupation with new forms of mediation finds expression in the same optical rhetoric that serves as the theater for cyberwarfare in popular "drone thrillers" or how Teju Cole does the same thing when he uses the Twitter platform to sabotage the conclusions of classic novels with 140-character "drone stories." Saint convinces me that Cole's *Open City* turns the self-righteous imperative "only connect" inside out and comes down on the side of distancing oneself from others as the more durable form of social relations. Paul Stasi boils down Walter Benn Michaels's influential definition of art in the age of neoliberalism to an effacement of "notions of relation and containment" that enables "a fluidity of experience" to transcend "the coherence of literary form and the determinations of social ground." Sound familiar? Stasi argues that James's *Golden Bowl* anticipates such a moment of transcendence, when "fortune and acquisition create an aesthetic power to see," a power to see that regards itself, as James does *not*, as "the emblem of all freedom." In each case, these essays imply that novels offer the lure of a freedom that proves to be anything but.

JM: Although these essays show how freedom functions as a lure, they do not appear interested in reinscribing it as a goal. I understand these essays as not particularly nostalgic for any pre-neoliberalism. It can seem as if the contemporary novel is more like a diagnostic tool than a fount of actionable information or a repository of instructions for conduct. I am not at all sure that our contributors are happy about that job description for the novel, however, and a look at their conclusions suggests cravings for other options. Vaughn Rasberry's essay is the perfect bookend for the collection, in part because of where he winds up: confirming via a reading of Francis Spufford's *Red Plenty* that the novel makes the past available as a resource. *Red Plenty* recalls a "road constructed but not traveled in the twentieth century," Rasberry explains, one "that could have precipitated what appears then and now as a hopelessly utopian prospect: a colorblind world order." Rasberry gives and takes away transcendence in the same gesture. I do not interpret this as a trick on his part so much as a confirmation: there are more interesting lost causes than liberalism's version of freedom buried in the garbage dump of history for novels to dig up.



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Those readers who are keen to clarify these questions or redirect them in a way that would move the conversation forward should email commentary to [novel.forum@duke.edu](mailto:novel.forum@duke.edu) or tweet [@novelforum](https://twitter.com/novelforum). Please identify precisely where you would like to insert your comment and include your name and affiliation. Appropriate responses will be posted along with this introduction on the *Novel* website, [novel.trinity.duke.edu](http://novel.trinity.duke.edu), under “news.”

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